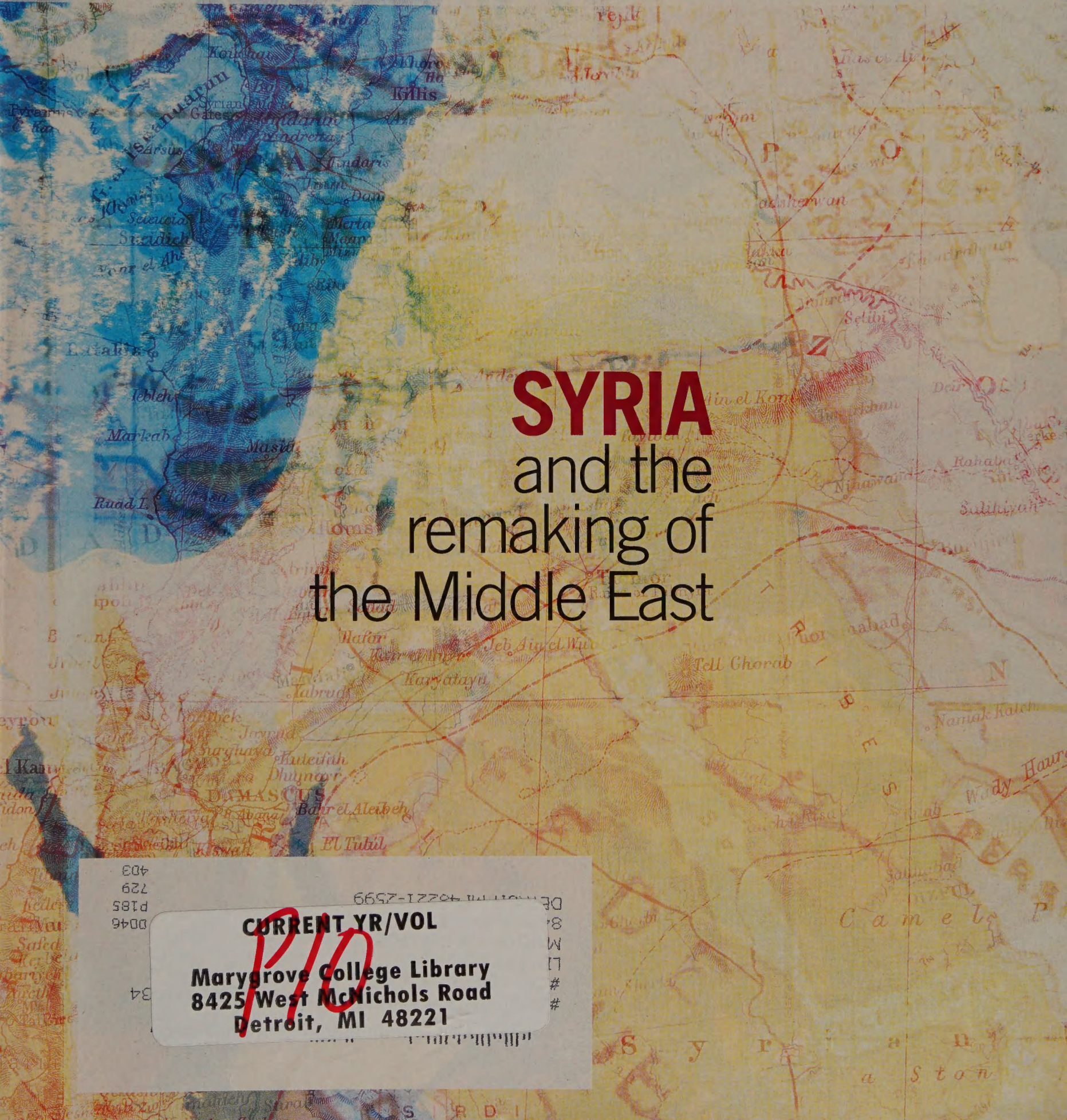


# THE Christian CENTURY

*Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.*



## SYRIA and the remaking of the Middle East


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## Boundary lines

IN “TWO UNCLES” (p. 13), Brian Doyle describes how a pair of his uncles were unique and peculiar men who would sit at family gatherings “silent as mountains.” Doyle’s piece made me think about my own uncles. One of them, Uncle Short (yes, he was short), was gone for many years. The story my mother told was that he worked for General Electric in western Pennsylvania and was too busy to come home to visit.

But when I was ten, Uncle Short suddenly appeared. He moved into my grandparents’ house and sat in his room all day reading salacious paperbacks. He was gruff, and he didn’t smell too good when I planted the obligatory kiss on his cheek. But I was always compensated with a 50-cent coin and a “Here, kid. Now beat it.” Decades later I learned that he’d served time for embezzlement in the state penitentiary.

Short was the oldest of eight children; the youngest was Uncle Jack—John Calvin McCormick, my mother’s favorite brother and my namesake. Jack was lively, full of fun, and constantly in trouble. He enlisted in the Marine Corps after Pearl Harbor, and I have a faded photograph of him at 22 in his uniform, walking arm in arm with my mother. It was 1942. In 1944 he was killed in the assault on Saipan, in the Mariana Islands. I’ve thought a lot about him over the years.

In “War without end” (p. 22), Barbara Wagner Dueholm writes about her father, a World War II veteran who was traumatized by his wartime experience. Dueholm’s mother

remembers that, when he returned in 1945, he was a completely different man from the one she married in 1943. It made me wonder how Uncle Jack would have navigated the unspeakable horrors of the war.

There was some closure for me regarding Uncle Jack. I was visiting Presbyterian chaplains at Hawaii military installations, and my guide asked if I’d like to visit the Punch Bowl, the huge military cemetery in Honolulu where the bodies of war dead, recovered from temporary graves all over the South Pacific, were laid to rest. I told him about Uncle Jack.

The officer took me to a building containing records of every burial, and there he was: PFC John Calvin McCormick, August 4, 1920–June 22, 1944, Saipan. I’m sure I’m the only one of his family to have visited his gravesite. When we found it, I stood there for a long time.

“The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.” Every time I read those words from Psalm 16 I think about how parents and family members, incidents and sites fall into place, and how an individual’s life is in large measure the sum total of all these influences. I know that boundary lines don’t fall in pleasant places for everyone all the time. Yet in my case they have. I thank God for the two big families that are my heritage: the uncles and aunts, some loving, some generous, some cranky, one a gruff felon, and one I never knew.



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## A pastor's place

In my 38 years of ministry, I have served different people in very different places, urban, suburban, and rural. Therefore I hoped for something worthwhile in Michael L. Lindvall's "A pastor's place" (April 15). Instead, I felt my soul deeply agitated.

When baptized, all Christians become "outsiders" and are set at odds with the culture. Yes, there are particular peoples, places, and histories associated with everywhere and everyone we are called to pastor, and yes, we are called to love the sheep and where they pasture. But we are not called to love what/whom they love or to hate what/whom they hate. We are not called to bless their culture, praise their prejudices, or sanctify their empire.

Yes, Jesus lived, died, and was raised in a particular place and time, but he is not stuck there. He is indeed Jesus of everywhere and everyone. The bread he blessed and broke, his own body given for the life of the world, does itself break local, parochial barriers. The wine, his own blood outpoured, unites us all under one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Instead of encouraging pastors to help lead their people in the way of Jesus, Lindvall advises us to go along to get along. He says it's for the sake of loving our people. In truth, he teaches us to please our people so that they might love us. When everyone is happy, with people little challenged and the world little changed, it must be a successful pastorate.

*Glenn C. Petersen  
Puyallup, Wash.*

I am familiar with the world in which Lindvall lives and appreciate his perspective.

The problem is that it is so hard for Brick Church members to think of themselves not as the privileged who have responsibilities to give out of their abundance, but as underprivileged who are poor in spirit and on the bottom of the heap in the kingdom of God—the camels trying to squeeze through the eye of the needle. They have no experience with life

at the lower end of the ladder. Americans will never see wealth as a stumbling block, a spiritual handicap, a threat to one's very soul, but Jesus did.

Jesus did not encourage the rich young ruler to give up his wealth as a test; he did it because he loved him so much he could not bear to see him live with this handicap. The Upper East Side will dazzle with wealth and power. In no place is it harder to live out the gospel.

*Patricia Hunt  
Staunton, Va.*

Lindvall writes of the problems inherent in seeing the pastor as a professional "provider of services," or a prophet "calling the people back to faithfulness." I was thrilled that he ended the essay with: "This is how the pastor ought to love those in his or her congregation. The pastor recognizes all their flaws and weaknesses but sees even these imperfections as full of promise."

I have been doubly blessed by two pastors, retired and nearing retirement, who preached the redemptive power of the Holy Spirit, God's love for his creation, and the blessings provided by studying scripture. I have read that pastor candidates are taught that the chief purpose of preaching is to create faith. But I have concluded that only the Holy Spirit, through the process of our introspective prayer and Bible study, can create faith. This process, perfected by the saints, allows the Holy Spirit to invade our minds in a subliminal way to suggest healing of our self-destructive behavior and errant perceptions of God's work.

*J. D. Pettigrew  
Broomfield, Colo.*

"A pastor's place" resonated deeply with me after three decades-long congregational ministries and four interim pastorates. Loving the people with whom God has placed me is both deep joy and pain, exactly as it should be. Though not explored in the article, the New Testament's use of the metaphor of shepherd has pro-

foundly informed my calling to love these sheep, who have loved me well too.

For me this theme connected well with Peter Brown's "Bridge to God" in the same issue, which recognizes the specificity of incarnation and the tension between the here and now and the then and there of the reign of God. Early on I realized that my calling was not about career building. These two articles powerfully explain why.

*Norman Stolpe  
Dallas, Tex.*

### Dealing with dementia . . .

I read with interest Samuel Wells's "Dementia and resurrection" (April 1). As a clergyperson who works as a chaplain in a United Methodist retirement community with a high incidence of dementia, his theology and insights are welcome and helpful.

However, as someone trying to balance full-time ministry, my own family, and the full-time care of my mother, who has significant dementia, I would challenge Wells to move beyond his somewhat sentimental platitudes about how we can deal with dementia.

I am blessed to have a good deal of emotional and spiritual support, and I long ago "let go of who and what" my mother once was. But the hard cold reality of caring for persons with midstage and advanced dementia who do not have significant financial resources is a far cry from a cheerful "they're moving into something new." Managing the anger and anxiety of these persons and meeting their personal needs is an exhausting and never-ending task.

If we in the body of Christ truly care for persons with dementia and the families who care for them, we will move beyond theological and pastoral platitudes and advocate for significant policy changes that will provide practical, tangible, and professional help in meeting the day-to-day needs of these persons.

*Karen Crutchfield  
Snow Hill, N.C.*



May 13, 2015

## We're all Californians

No rain in California—which grows half the country's fruits and vegetables—is a disaster for all of us. But the drought, now entering its fourth year, is also an opportunity. It's a chance to take a long-needed hard look at how water is used and conserved, how food is grown, and what sustainable development means.

With 80 percent of California's water usage devoted to agriculture, that's the first place to make major changes. "Most watering technology is stupid and doesn't react to the environment," says CEO Chris Spain of the water technology firm HydroPoint. "We shouldn't be talking about a 25 percent reduction in water use, but rather a 95 percent elimination of wasted water." In fact, many California farmers have already become water technicians, measuring soil and leaf moisture content and treating every drop as utterly precious.

According to Joshua Haggmark, a water resources manager in Santa Barbara, the needed studies on groundwater sustainability have yet to be done. In California, he said, "people just kind of pump as much as they want" from the ground. "There is no control, no oversight, and unfortunately it's gotten a lot of basins in trouble."

While technological solutions for recovering water are important, so are lifestyle changes. Residents in arid regions are learning to cultivate desert plants and to forget about green lawns. People across the country can learn about growing their own vegetables and encouraging local agriculture. Relying on food transported all the way from California to the rest of the country was perhaps never sustainable.

We also need to gain a better understanding of just how much development a particular piece of land can sustain. There are limits to population growth in the arid Southwest.

As farmers adopt new practices and the state imposes a 25 percent reduction on municipal water consumption, one industry that uses water hasn't budged: oil. The kind of hydraulic fracking done in California is not as water intensive as other kinds, and some estimates say that fracking in California amounts to a tiny fraction of 1 percent of overall water usage. But at this point, every gallon counts. And unlike water used in agriculture, the water used for fracking is chemically tainted and cannot be recycled.

Potable water is fast becoming more precious than oil—a calculation that will transform the global economy. We are learning how climate, consumption, water, oil, and agriculture are all interconnected in a way that calls for a nationwide reckoning. When it comes to the drought, we are all Californians.

**Potable water is fast becoming more precious than oil.**



# CENTURY marks

**MINIMUM WAGE:** Dan Price, owner and chief executive officer of Gravity Payments, has cut his salary and given each of his employees a \$70,000 wage. This move raises the salaries for more than half of the 120-person staff at his credit card processing company in Seattle. Many business leaders have criticized his move. Rush Limbaugh called it socialist, predicting the company would fail. Tim Kane, an economist at the conservative Hoover Institute at Stanford University, said, "It will reduce turnover, increase morale, and help him build an even greater company." The day after the new wage plan was made public, Price received letters from 3,500 job applicants, and Gravity signed up

several new clients (*New York Times*, April 19).

**EVERYDAY HERO:** Feidin Santana feared for his life when he made a video recording of a policeman shooting Walter Scott in the back in North Charleston, South Carolina. After Santana took the video with his phone, he considered deleting the evidence and fleeing town. But because he turned the video over to the police, the officer, Michael Slager, was held accountable for the shooting. Scott, an unarmed black man, was shot after being stopped for a broken taillight. Santana encourages others to record bad things happening, even though he says he had doubts about

what he was doing at the time (*Washington Post*, April 9).

**RELIVING THE PAIN:** The day of the 2013 Boston Marathon was the worst day in the lives of Bill and Denise Richard's family. Their eight-year-old son was killed, their seven-year-old daughter lost a leg, and both Bill and Denise were injured. They have asked federal authorities to take the death penalty off the table for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who was convicted for his part in the Boston bombings. The Richards wrote that they "understand . . . the heinousness and the brutality of the crimes committed," but "the continued pursuit of that punishment could bring years of appeals and prolong reliving the most painful day of our lives" (AP).

**NO RESPECT:** In an article lambasting Cornel West's animosity toward President Obama, Michael Eric Dyson recounts a private conversation he had with West at a black newspaper conference. West asked Dyson how he escaped being labeled an "Obama hater." Dyson said that whenever he speaks to a black audience he expresses appreciation for Obama, lauds his epic achievement in becoming the first black president, and focuses on the acrimony Obama faces as a black president. Only then does Dyson criticize Obama's mistakes and failures. West responded: "Well, I guess that's the difference between me and you. I don't respect the brother at all." West was Dyson's mentor at Princeton (*New Republic*, April 19).

**PRESIDENTIAL RELIGION:** A few of the current candidates for president have remained members of the faith in which they were raised: Hillary Clinton (Methodist), Ben Carson (Seventh-day Adventist), and Rick Santorum (Catholic).





Numerous other candidates have made a switch: Jeb Bush switched from the Episcopal to the Catholic Church. Rand Paul moved from the Episcopal Church to a Presbyterian church. Ted Cruz grew up in the home of lapsed Catholics until his father joined the Southern Baptists. Marco Rubio has migrated from the Catholic Church to Mormonism and back again to the Catholics, but sometimes goes with his Baptist spouse to her independent church. Bobby Jindal made the biggest switch: from the Hinduism of his youth to the Catholic faith (*Newsweek*, April 2).

**RELIGION ON ICE:** Religion is often on display in professional athletics, with the exception of the National Hockey League. The few hockey players who are open about their faith buck a tradition of reticence or downright distrustfulness toward religion. Unlike professional football or basketball, many NHL players come from Canada or Europe, where the culture is much more secular and religious faith is closely guarded. There is also the suspicion in hockey that a person of faith might be too soft a player. Some hockey clubs make chapel services available, but far fewer than in professional basketball (*Boston Globe*, April 5).

**LOCAL CHURCH:** The Leadership Network/Generis Multisite Church Scorecard shows that 85 percent of multisite churches are growing. The study of 535 multisite churches released last fall shows that struggling churches' chances of survival are best when they merge with a multisite church. Megachurches are taking note of the trend. Jeff Bogue, senior pastor of a megachurch in the Akron, Ohio, area, says that multisite churches are a way of taking the church to where the people are, rather than making them come to you. It is a way of relocating the local church (*Akron Beacon Journal*, April 4).

**BELIEVE IT OR NOT:** Madison, Wisconsin, has become the first municipality to make atheists a protected class of persons, protecting their civil rights in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations. The sponsor of the ordi-

**“Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it.”**

— Pope Francis, calling the slaughter of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire the first genocide in the 20th century (*Crux*, April 12)

**“Taking positions that don't track with your ethnic group's orthodoxies, or indeed living your life in a way that is not defined by clan commitment, are not signs of self-hatred but rather an indication of learning to value oneself.”**

— Armenian-American **Meline Toumani**, arguing that Armenians need to move beyond defining themselves by the genocide of their people in 1915 (*New York Times*, April 19)

nance said that it is only fair to protect nonreligious belief since varieties of religious belief are protected. Five atheists spoke up in favor of the proposal, sharing stories of discrimination. No one spoke against the proposal ([www.channel3000.com](http://www.channel3000.com), April 1).

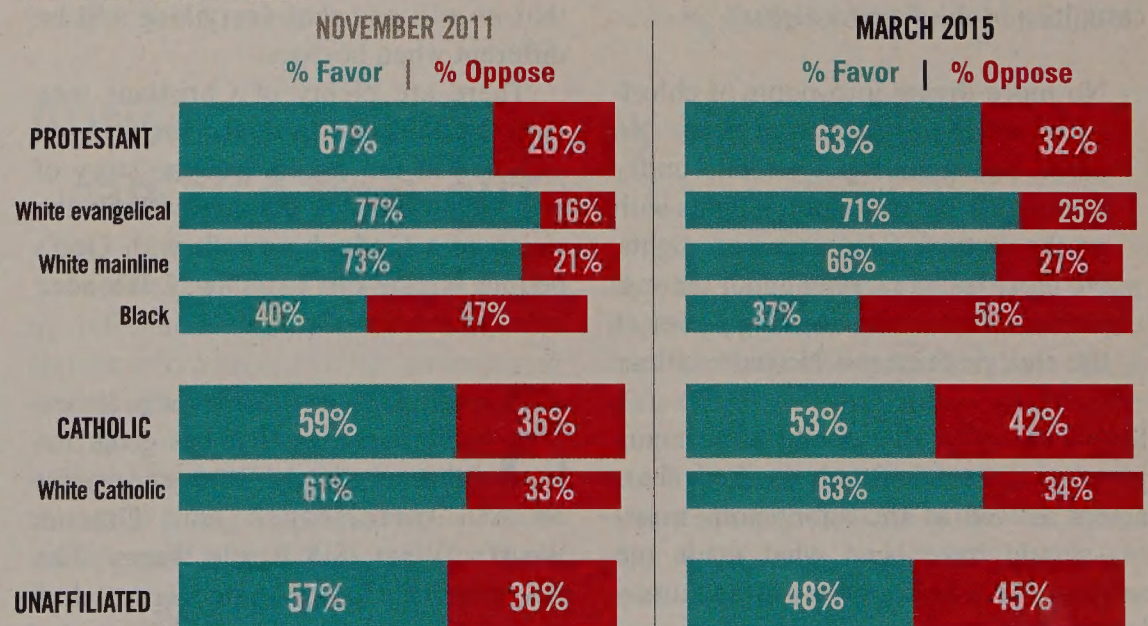
**CIVIL WAR:** James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, warned that if the Supreme Court rules in favor of marriage equality for gays, it could lead to civil war. He predicted that approval of gay marriage would lead to the collapse of the nation. “The country can be no stronger than its families. . . . So we need to do everything we can to try to hold [marriage equality] back and to preserve the institution of marriage,”

Dobson said on a conference call with activists (Right Wing Watch, April 8).

**MATCHMAKER:** The senior rabbi of the Movement for Reform Judaism in England is launching a web-based matchmaking service that will cater to same-sex Jews and opposite-sex couples. “The point to make is that we want to help people to meet other Jews, those who are interested in living a Jewish life,” said Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner. England's Reform and Liberal Jewish movements have long approved of gay marriage, but it has not been accepted by the much larger Orthodox community in England. The Reform movement is willing to marry gay and straight couples as long as both are Jewish (RNS).

## RELIGION IN AMERICA & THE DEATH PENALTY

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER



[“Don't know” responses not included. Totals will not equal 100%.]



Why I'm not in a rush for the new earth

# Come slowly, Lord Jesus

by Katherine Willis Pershey

AS A GENERAL RULE, I do not read dystopian fiction. Sometimes, however, my distaste for the genre is superseded by my pathological need to be a good book club member. I am loathe to skip a meeting, and I don't like to attend without having read the book. This is how I came to read *Station Eleven*, the highly acclaimed 2014 National Book Award finalist by Emily St. John Mandel: under the duress of peer pressure. It's a well-executed and engrossing book that I cannot stop wishing I hadn't read.

I spent a recent Saturday with my nose in the book, if one can still use that phrase for reading a book on the Kindle app for iPad. I slept terribly that night, as I often do when my mind is enmeshed in something unpleasant. I dreamed myself into the disturbing near-future that Mandel imagines: a civilization extinguished by a massive influenza pandemic. Nearly everyone gone, and nearly everything gone, too.

In a haunting chapter titled "An Incomplete List," Mandel catalogs the casualties of the flu apocalypse:

No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities.

Surely the miserable deaths of so many people—the meticulously crafted characters as well as the anonymous masses—should have been what made me saddest. But I didn't weep for the human loss in *Station Eleven*. Fictional charac-

ters die fictional deaths, and this rarely evokes more than fictional grief. It was the vision of a life without swimming pools and porch lights that undid me. It filled me with a potent nostalgia for a world that has not ended—not yet.

I am perhaps a bit more eschatologically minded than some mainline pastors. I'm stubborn about eschatology; I don't want to leave it all to the premillennial dispensationalists. I want a robust vision of the telos of the story, and the way I read scripture leads me to believe that we are wise to entrust ourselves to God's future, that it is faithful to hope that in

When the Kingdom of God comes, I want to be able to sleep in my own bed.

the fullness of time there will be reconciliation and restoration. I preach about the new heaven and the new earth. My favorite part of the communion liturgy is the part where we intone, "Christ will come again"—because I actually believe that he will and that everything will be different when he does.

There are plenty of Christians who wish the book of Revelation hadn't been included in the canon. But the story of our faith would be anemic without the vision of a God who dwells with God's people, wiping our tears away. We need an Alpha and an Omega.

*Station Eleven* isn't the only apocalyptic narrative that has given me nightmares lately. Between services on Ash Wednesday, I read Graeme Wood's "What ISIS Really Wants." The *Atlantic* article has generated a great deal of controversy for arguing that the terror-

ist caliphate is, in fact, deeply Islamic—despite many Muslims' insistence that ISIS is rife with gross distortions of the faith. The group's understanding of Islam is profoundly disturbing—as it must be to justify the horrific violence perpetuated by its adherents.

A vicious prophet inhabits the world of *Station Eleven*, and Mandel's description applies as well to violent fanatics of any religious persuasion:

If you are the light, if your enemies are darkness, then there's nothing that you cannot justify. There's nothing

you can't survive, because there's nothing that you will not do.

ISIS is wholly uncivilized. Its members expect an apocalypse, sooner rather than later, and their actions are intended to expedite the end of the world. I can't bear to consider the "incomplete list" of things that presumably wouldn't endure in the dystopian utopia imagined by radicals such as Musa Cerantonio, the Australian ISIS supporter featured in Wood's article.

*Station Eleven* and "What ISIS Really Wants" are, to be clear, as disparate as fire and ice. Yet each offers a sufficiently terrifying conclusion to the world as we know it. Reading them reminded me how much I don't actually want things to be different. This is probably evidence of

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Katherine Willis Pershey is associate minister at First Congregational Church in Western Springs, Illinois.



my privilege; it is usually the oppressed who yearn most ardently for apocalyptic vindication. Sure, there are changes I would love to see: an end to war and illness and hunger (and while we're at it: horror movies, *Grand Theft Auto* video games, and the month of January). But I want the kingdom of God to be civilized, and if possible I'd like to be able to keep sleeping in my own bed.

When I consider eschatology in the Bible, it's not the fiery lakes of the book of Revelation that unnerve me most. I'm well versed enough in apocalyptic literature to know that these images aren't meant to be interpreted literally. What

truly rattles me is Jesus' response to the Sadducees' query about marriage in the resurrection, a conversation that takes place in all three synoptic Gospels. The Sadducees propose a moderately ridiculous scenario: the same woman outliving seven ill-fated husbands. "In the resurrection," they ponder, "whose wife will she be?"

The question is meant to stump Jesus. His answer is startling: he essentially tells them they're asking the wrong question. "For when they rise from the dead," Jesus says in Mark's version, "they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

Is this good news? The promised paradise is presumably better than anything I know in this world. (There are jokes to be made here; perhaps the presence of certain husbands and certain wives could turn eternal life into a perfect hell.) Still, I find myself clinging to this life, full as it is of sorrows and joys. I find myself clinging to the smell of chlorine from my morning swim, to my favorite pop songs, to the sadnesses I have carried so long I don't know where they end and I begin. I find myself clinging to my husband. I long for God to make things right, but I'm in no rush. *Come, Lord Jesus*—but not yet. Not yet.

CC

## My Asperger's and my ministry

# Why I dread pastoral visits

by Dennis Sanders

IN 2008 I WAS diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder. For years I had wondered why I couldn't do things that everyone else did. I was relieved to finally have a name for what was going on with me. But I was also left wondering, because at that point I was looking at parish ministry positions for the first time. Pastors have to talk a lot, meet lots of people, and try to connect with them. Sometimes they have to steer through the storms of church politics. They have to know the rules that exist in a congregation, especially the unspoken ones. None of this meshed well with a disorder that makes communication a challenge.

Despite my doubts, that fall I became an associate pastor, with a discrete set of responsibilities around communications and mission. My time as an associate gave me confidence that I could do this pastor thing. But I didn't think I could

ever be the sole pastor of a church. There are just too many things a solo pastor has to keep track of, too many people to give attention to. I believe God was listening to my doubts, however, and preparing another challenge. In 2013 I began my first job in solo ministry.

## Autism is a thorn in my side, but it can also be a gift.

I think I've done OK so far. As I like to tell people, I haven't driven the church into a tree. I've been reminding myself to say thanks to all the laypeople who keep the church going and to send notes to people who haven't been to church in a long time. Sometimes I don't understand why I have to do these things. I do understand by now that being a pastor is about caring for the

people at least as much as knowing your theology. But it's challenging.

Take the typical Sunday at church. I spend a lot of time talking: making small talk, giving a children's sermon, thanking someone who brought food for the potluck, giving a sermon, and on and on.

By the time noon rolls around, I am depleted. I know that most pastors say they are tired after preaching, but this is on a whole other level. I have to go home so that I can "power down." Asperger's is not just a communication disorder; it's also a sensory disorder. After this infor-

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*Dennis Sanders is a Disciples of Christ pastor in Mahtomedi, Minnesota.*



mation overload, I need to be alone for a while to recharge my senses.

But that's not the only challenge. Some of the hardest things I have to do don't take place on Sunday.

One of the things that pastors do is visit people where they live. Some pastors love doing this. Some congregations have visitation pastors; the ones I know tend to be rather jovial and extroverted people. The church I serve doesn't have a visitation pastor. It has me.

Visiting people is hard for me, and it makes me nervous. I'm autistic. I'm bad at small talk, and it takes a lot of energy for me to meet people. What's more, like many with Asperger's, I overthink my time with people. I worry that I've said the wrong thing even when it looks like I haven't. And let's not even get into how much harder all this is on the phone.

As an associate pastor, I rarely made visits. As a solo pastor, I have to. I can't tell people that I'm autistic and, well, they'll just have to make do. It doesn't work that way.

So despite my dread, I go to the nursing home. I end up visiting some fascinating people there—folks who have lived some pretty interesting lives. Even as my eyes dart around and I count the moments till I can leave, I enjoy getting to know these people. When I leave, I am thankful to leave. But I am also grateful for the time to talk with people. I am glad to just be there and hear their stories.

Another challenge is that pastors sometimes have to do something that wasn't planned, like visit a family in a sudden crisis. People with Asperger's tend to make sense of the world by imposing a rigid order. I like to plan things, and I hate surprises. But as a pastor, surprises are part of the package. Somebody dies, or has a bad accident, and you get a phone call in the middle of the night.

I actually got such a call back when I was an associate. We were between senior pastors, and a longtime church member died. I had to meet with the family. A

wife of 60 years needed someone to hold her hand. My android brain might have wanted to protest, but I had a job to do. After all, the Christian life is filled with things we don't want to do, but we do them anyway for the greater glory of God. As a person with autism, there is a whole bunch of things I don't want to do, but God gives me the strength to do them.

It isn't easy. I make a lot of mistakes, and I spend a lot of time trying to rectify those mistakes. The worst thing about it? Most of the time I don't even know that I'm upsetting people by not doing something or not asking something. I come off as uncaring without realizing it.

But my autism has also made me more aware of the need for grace, the need to learn to love others even as they make mistakes, too. I'm not always good at being patient. But reminding myself of the way I can be helps me remember that I need a lot of grace from others, and they need it too. I can't pretend I have it all together, because I don't. It's all out there. I can't hide.

The apostle Paul had something he called a "thorn in his side." He asked God to take it from him. God replied, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." For me, Paul's words bring to mind the 1980s pop song "Broken Wings":

So take these broken wings  
And learn to fly again, learn to live so free.  
And when we hear the voices sing,  
The book of love will open up and let us in.

As humans, we find ways of hiding, of telling ourselves how great we are and basically telling ourselves and one another that we don't need God. Yet God loves us.

My autism is my thorn in my side, my broken wings. But God is able to do mighty things through me, things like visiting 90-year-old women at the nursing home. What's more, autism can also be a gift—not because it's wonderful, but because it lets me know that I am human after all. And I am still loved by God.

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## We're back

After the fire, houses in the chaparral  
start up again like new shoots of poison oak.  
The resilience of nature? The power  
of habit? The shallows of the human mind?

We keep building on the flood plain,  
kicking steps up the avalanche chute,  
camping out on the crumbling  
lip of the volcano.

Those hollow figures at Pompeii,  
crouched in the admission of error,  
became the casts for Rodin's *Thinker*.  
Think about it.

In Korea, there are a hundred different men  
who claim to be returned messiahs  
(not counting their messiah wives)—  
and thousands who erect their faith upon this sand.

And here in the U.S. of A., cutting sagebrush  
in my yard, the dry winds parting my lips,  
I feel right at home with the rest,  
making do, claiming ground.

Paul Willis



# Two uncles

BY BRIAN DOYLE

**THOUGH I HAD** but two uncles, I was rich in uncles, for they were honest and genuine men, wry and gentle, generous in everything but words; you never met two quieter souls, and many was the family event during which I sat alongside or between them, and every hour or so one would murmur yes, in response to some moppet's question, and the other would smile at the garrulity of his counterpart, and they would both sit back and again be as silent as mountains.

One was a telephone lineman, the other in the insurance trade; both had the swept-back hair of a certain time and sort of man in America; both were friendly and witty and gracious but somehow sad in the most subtle way; and it was not until years after their deaths that I began to learn of the real shapes of their lives when they were not silent and smiling uncles in the hubbub of a clan event. One had been a fine student, and saved his boyhood money for college, and lost it all in a day, when the market crashed, and dragged down millions of dreams with it; he then married and raised many children, and ran his business, but never loved his business, though he did it well; to spend a life doing something well but never liking it would be a sort of a prison, wouldn't it?

The other was in the army during the war, and met his wife on a train, and they were inspired by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin and Catherine de Hueck Doherty, and went into rural America, and tried to live simply, and attend to the holiness of the quotidian, but they were city people, not farmers, and they needed to eat, and many children were born to them, so my uncle became a telephone lineman, and his hands were dark with pitch, and that was his work for many years, though he never loved it. I suspect he did it well, and never complained, or

hatched schemes to get rich, but again, to do something well all your life that you never loved, what would a man think in the evenings, as he sat on his porch and smoked and watched for swifts to pour out of chimneys, and stitch dusk into dark?

They were polite, and courteous, and amusing men, if you listened carefully; and they never debated politics, or pontificated about sports and religion, or broadcast

## They were honest, genuine, and as silent as mountains.

their own wisdom and prominence, as so many men do in the course of the social ramble; neither did they offer cutting remarks about anyone else, or commit calumny, or say sneering things seemingly in jest but not really joking at all; nor did they wish to be the wittiest, the most popular, the most handsome, the mayors of the room; nor did they seek to be seen as chieftains or pillars of the clan.

They were content to sit quietly in the corner, near each other, smiling gently, watching the swirl and whirl of the tribe at play; and while they would eat when the time came, and each sip his can

or two of beer, I do not ever remember them walking across the room or yard, or circling the table of savories with a sopping paper plate, or even entering or leaving the room or the yard. To me they were always already there, seated, smiling gently, in the background—in the corners of the living room, along the fence in the backyard, off the main stage, observing their brother's family, or their sister-in-law's family, or their own families, as they mixed and milled.

What they thought, deep in their souls; what they so wished to be, and never became; the shape and yearning of their love, the seasons they loved best, the music they hummed when alone; which child they loved best and never admitted, which small habit of their wives drove them mad; which household

task they hated most, which books they loved best; what gods they imagined when they prayed, what fates they hoped for after death—all things I will never know; unless someday somehow I will sit between them again, and this time turn to one and then the other, and to each say, Uncle, tell me everything, tell me all the stories in your heart, tell me, for now I am listening like I should have listened then; and for my own failure to ask then, for my ignorance of who you were as men, uncles, I ask your forgiveness; but now we have all the time there is, and my ears are yours to fill with stories. **CC**

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## God enters through the eye

Like a fish that sees the wobbling silver roof  
That caps his world, dim, lit by flashes,  
I look at Mono Lake, its sky and clouds  
Silent in a mountain bowl, centered  
In the rocky gateway of Tioga Pass.

God enters through the eye, a small, bright hook,  
A thin floating line. We blink. He yanks.

Lawrence N. DiCostanzo

Brian Doyle is editor of Portland Magazine.



## Anti-Semitism spikes, say researchers

**T**he number of violent anti-Semitic attacks around the world surged nearly 40 percent last year, according to a report released in mid-April by researchers at Tel Aviv University in Israel.

The report noted 766 recorded incidents against Jewish people in 2014—the worst year for attacks since 2009. The attacks were “perpetrated with or without weapons and by arson, vandalism, or direct threats against Jewish persons or institutions such as synagogues, community centers, schools, cemeteries, and monuments as well as private property,” the authors of the report, based at the Kantor Center at Tel Aviv University, said.

In 2013, there were 554 registered incidents.

“The overall feeling among many Jewish people is one of living in an intensifying anti-Jewish environment that has become not only insulting and threatening but outright dangerous, and that they are facing an explosion of hatred towards them as individuals, their communities, and Israel, as a Jewish state,” the study said.

There was a sharp rise in the number of incidents in the United Kingdom (141 in 2014, compared to 95 in 2013), Australia (30 versus 11), Germany (76 versus 36), Austria (9 versus 4), Italy (23 versus 12), and Sweden (17 versus 3).

However, the highest number of violent cases recorded in 2014 was in France, which saw 164 incidences, up from 141 in 2013. In recent years, the country has consistently seen the most reported cases of anti-Semitic violence worldwide, the report said. In January, four people were killed at a kosher supermarket during a terrorist attack in Paris.

Earlier this month, Roger Cukierman, the president of Crif, a Paris-based organization that represents Jewish-French organizations, said that as incidences of anti-Semitic violence have risen, Jewish people have been left pondering their future in the nation.

“If you are a father or mother and you bring your children to school that is like a fortress protected by police and the army with machine guns, you may have doubts about whether you want these kids to remain in such an environment,” said Cukierman, referring to security efforts by French authorities to protect its Jewish-French citizens after the Paris attacks.

France has the largest Jewish popula-

tion outside of Israel and the United States, with about 475,000, or just over 3 percent of the world’s Jewish population, according to the Jewish Virtual Library, an online resource. That compares to about 5.7 million in the United States—home to 40 percent of the world’s Jews—and just over 6 million in Israel.

The report identified a number of possible reasons for the spike in attacks last year, including the conflict last summer in Gaza between Hamas and Israel as well as a “general climate of hatred and violence” that has accompanied the sudden rise of Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq. The attacks in Paris were not counted as part of the report because they occurred this year.

—Kim Hjeltsgaard, *USA Today*

## Despite anti-Semitism, Jewish communities thrive in Central, Eastern Europe

**IN CAFÉ ELFENBEIN**, which opened last year in a trendy Berlin neighborhood, two businessmen wearing yarmulkes—Jewish skullcaps—chat away.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and homemade rugelach fills the shop, where a rabbi has certified that all the food is kosher.

The addition to the city points to a trend obscured by rising anti-Semitism and terror attacks in France and Denmark that have alienated Jews. In Central and Eastern Europe, Jewish life is thriving.

One major reason is that the younger generation is shaping a new Jewish identity.

“Jewish life is flourishing in Berlin and the rest of the country,” said Jutta

Wagemann, spokeswoman for the Central Council of Jews in Germany.

The Jewish community in Germany remains small, about 200,000 out of 80 million people. It has grown significantly from its postwar population of 37,000 in 1950 because of immigration from the former Soviet Union. The community is putting its mark on the country’s cultural landscape.

In the East German city of Cottbus, an area known for right-wing extremists, an unused church was recently turned into a synagogue, providing space for the 460 members of the Jewish-Russian community.

In 2013, the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam opened to



great fanfare, making the city near Berlin the nucleus of Jewish studies in Germany.

In February, more than 1,000 Jewish young people age 11 to 19 met at the Jewrovision song-and-dance contest in Cologne, a knockoff of the decades-old Eurovision contest held across the continent. It's a talent show and gathering for youth to celebrate the sabbath, learn about Jewish tradition, and discover their own Jewish identity.

"There has been a big generational change," said Oren Osterer, organizer of the European Maccabi Games, the biggest Jewish sports event, which will take place in Germany for the first time this summer. "Many in the Jewish community in Europe didn't want the games to take place in Germany. They thought that Germany wasn't ready yet."

The younger generation wanted this to change, he said. Until 2011, the German Maccabi delegation at the opening ceremony didn't wear the country's national colors—red, yellow, and black. They instead wore Israel's blue and white.

In Germany, synagogues and Jewish schools have security. Jewish locations have been vandalized, and swastikas appear with unnerving regularity. Jews have been attacked on the streets of Berlin.

Even so, there has been no recent mass exodus to Israel because of those events, community members say.

In Eastern Europe, where anti-Semitism is deeply rooted, the Jewish communities are remaking themselves, according to members of those groups.

In Poland, home to 25,000 Jews, a museum called the History of Polish Jews opened in Warsaw in October. Jewish dance and folk music have become trendy. A few Jewish twentysomethings created the fashion brand Risk OY with Yiddish-inspired clothing in 2012. T-shirts feature such slogans as "Oy oy, my boy is goy" and "ISREAL."

There is a new Jewish identity here, said Anna Tenenbaum, cofounder of Risk OY.

"Young Jewish people in Poland are coming back to their roots," she said. "We have started to search for our family history, but at the same time, we don't only want to look back. The future is important to us. We want to be responsi-



PHOTO BY HARALD FRANZEN, COURTESY OF USA TODAY

**NEW IDENTITY:** *Café Elfenbein ("Cafe Ivory") in Berlin, which opened last year, is certified to be kosher and serves foods like bagels and rugelach. It is evidence of Jewish flourishing in Central and Eastern Europe, especially among a younger generation.*

ble for our identity, and at the same time not be too serious about it."

Jewish identity is changing in Europe, largely because young people are educated in a different environment than the previous generation, said Diego Ornique, Europe regional director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a humanitarian group based in New York.

"The younger generation is embracing their culture and identity through informal initiatives and grassroots movements," he said.

In Hungary, which has a community of 150,000 Jews, about 1,500 children and teenagers from 25 different countries meet at the Szarvas International Jewish Youth Camp. For 12 weeks each summer, young Jews discover their cultural and religious heritage and learn about Jewish traditions.

The camp was established 25 years ago to "rebuild the Jewish identity in central and Eastern Europe and to plant the idea of the positive Jewish experience through informal Jewish education," Szarvas director Sasha Friedman said.

He said the Jewish community in Hungary is going through a "renaissance" despite the difficult political situation for minorities, especially non-

Christians and Roma. He noted that more than 12,000 people celebrated last year's Judafest street festival in Budapest, almost a 40 percent increase over the prior year. That has happened with other Jewish celebrations, also.

"Ten to 15 years ago, there was only one big Purim holiday event in Budapest. Now you can visit around ten," Friedman said, referring to the springtime Jewish holiday. "I'm proud to be part of this growing community." —Katarina Wecker and Maya Vidon, *USA Today*

## Canadian Supreme Court rules against opening meetings with prayer

Canada's Supreme Court has ruled that a small town in Quebec may not open its council meetings with prayer.

In a unanimous ruling April 15, Canada's highest court ruled that the city of Saguenay can no longer publicly recite a Catholic prayer because it infringes on freedom of conscience and religion.

The case dates back to 2007, when a





**NEUTRAL IN RELIGION:** At the Supreme Court of Canada Building in Ottawa, justices ruled that public prayer is not allowed to open government meetings.

resident of Saguenay complained about public prayer at city hall.

Last year, a divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled that legislative bodies such as city councils could begin their meetings with prayer, even if it plainly favors a specific religion.

But the Canadian high court ruled that the country's social mores have "given rise to a concept of neutrality according to which the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs. The state must instead remain neutral in this regard. This neutrality requires that the state neither favor nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for nonbelief."

The court said a nondenominational prayer is still religious in nature and would exclude nonbelievers.

In 2011, a human rights tribunal in Quebec ordered an end to the prayers and awarded \$30,000 in damages to the complainant.

Quebec's Court of Appeals overturned that decision two years later, saying the town imposed no religious views on its citizens.

But the high court ruled that it is the state's "duty to protect every person's freedom of conscience and religion." That means it "may not use its powers in such a way as to promote the participation of certain believers or nonbelievers in public life to the detriment of others."

The court awarded the complainant \$33,500 in damages.

Only hours after the ruling was made public, the city of Ottawa suspended its practice of beginning council meetings with a prayer, saying it needs to review the decision. Other municipalities have also halted the practice, pending a review.

—Ron Csillag, Religion News Service

## Grand Canal project in Nicaragua worries bishops and scientists

On the windy shore of Lake Nicaragua, farmer Dayton Guzman surveys the vast expanse of water his family relies on for irrigation of the land they have been farming for generations.

"If something affects the lake," he said, "it affects us."

The lake's future is in doubt since a Chinese-backed canal project was inaugurated late last year. The multi-billion-dollar Grand Canal is slated to stretch 170 miles from the Caribbean to the Pacific, and some 60 miles of it will cross through this lake.

The government argues that the project will create tens of thousands of jobs and boost GDP by up to 12 percent, in a country where nearly three-quarters of the population lives on less than \$4 a day.

But the canal has encountered both careful criticism and fierce opposition from Nicaraguans. And the lake has become a potent symbol of what's at stake. The 3,000-square-mile lake, Central America's largest, is home to endangered species and a water source for hundreds of thousands of people.

Scientists warn that the dredging required for the canal would result in irrevocable damage. Concerns about land expropriation and pollution are spreading, with tens of thousands of demonstrators marching in more than 35 protests to date. The Nicaraguan Conference of Bishops has called on the government of President Daniel Ortega for open debate and increased transparency, saying it's "worried" about the project.

President Ortega has been the target of protests before, but this time may be different. In recent years, public criticism has followed party lines. But the protests now include "many who are sympathetic to the government," said Manuel Ortega Hegg, a Nicaraguan sociologist. "What's new is they involve a wider range of groups, like *campesinos*."

Those farmers are traditionally a Sandinista party base. But now, dissent goes "beyond political parties," Hegg said.

As the afternoon sun turns amber on

the island of Ometepe, a white egret stalks in the lake shallows and a woman washes clothes on a broad detergent-stained rock. A mother and her son fish from the shore, throwing in their lines again and again as the sun sets.

The canal would pass within three miles of Ometepe. Some residents complain the government hasn't given them any information.

"If the canal is going to hurt us fishermen, we need to know how it will affect us," said Santos Lopes, who's been fishing on the lake for 30 years. He said he would give up his nets to earn a wage working on the canal. But he doesn't know if that trade-off is even possible.

A gathering of international scientists called for an independent environmental assessment, but the government hasn't responded.

Jorge Huete-Pérez, a biologist and vice president of the Academy of Sciences of Nicaragua, hosted the conference about the canal in November. Both the government environmental consultants and the Hong Kong firm backing the project declined invitations.

"We know they're going to damage the lake, because there's no technology they can use that's not going to be invasive and create damage," Huete-Pérez said. "All of these questions need to be discussed transparently... Nicaragua is a democracy."

But some say Nicaragua's democracy is an illusion. As president during the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s, Ortega supported leftist policies such as land reform and nationalizing industries. On his return to power in 2006, he promised to help the poor and ensure access to free education and health care.

That year, he formed a strategic alliance with the Catholic Church. Since then, his government has consolidated independent media into state-controlled channels, enforced party loyalty from state employees, and restricted access to information. Civil society groups say their voices are suppressed, and legal efforts to modify the canal law have been blocked.

Despite the alliance, the Conference of Bishops condemned the government's "political practice" in its latest missive, accusing it of "abandonment of the common good" and calling its treatment of the conversation around the canal a sign



of “ambition, authoritarianism . . . and corruption, a grave sin.”

The bishops also warned that communities on the canal route are determined in their opposition, which could lead to “armed conflict” if the government does not address dissent in a democratic manner.

Ometepe has been the site of several recent protests. Maria, a secondary school teacher on Ometepe, who asked that only her first name be used, said teachers were required to attend a canal presentation by a Sandinista party representative. They were told to teach their students that the canal has “no negative environmental impacts and would create jobs,” she said.

While many teachers are critical of the project, Maria fears losing her job if she speaks out. If you’re a state employee, she said, “you have to be in agreement” with the party.

The government is pushing forward, opening canal commission offices in communities slated for expropriation.

Meanwhile protests continue. Hegg, the sociologist, said that since Nicaraguans were shut out of dialogue, “their only recourse is to take to the streets.” —Sara Van Note, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Vatican ends investigation of U.S. women religious

The Vatican on April 16 officially ended a seven-year investigation of American nuns with a compromise.

“We are pleased at the completion,” said Sister Sharon Holland, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, in a statement released after a meeting in Rome with the Vatican’s top doctrinal officials. The investigation “involved long and challenging exchanges of our understandings of and perspectives on critical matters of religious life and its practice.”

The investigation of the LCWR, a network of 1,500 Catholic sisters that repre-

sents about 80 percent of the 50,000 nuns in the United States, began in 2008.

“We learned that what we hold in common is much greater than any of our differences,” Holland said.

In a brief statement, Cardinal Gerhard Müller, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and leader of the effort to rein in the nuns, said he was confident that the mission of the nuns “is rooted in the tradition of the Church” and that they are “essential for the flourishing of religious life in the Church.”

The original report, issued almost exactly three years prior, had accused the nuns of promoting “certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith.”

Müller’s office charged that the theological speculations of some American sisters were straying too far from traditional doctrines and said the sisters were focusing too much on social justice issues, such as caring for the poor and advocating for immigrants. The CDF was also upset that many sisters were active in promoting health-care reform in the United States. The Vatican office said LCWR members should spend more time advancing church teachings on sexuality and abortion.

The final report issued April 16 indicated that the nuns acceded to some oversight of their publications and choice of speakers for their annual conference, and both sides agreed to a new set of statutes for the LCWR.

The delegation of American nuns met with Francis on April 16 for 50 minutes in an encounter that seemed to underscore the sisters’ affinity for the pope’s focus on social justice and his pastoral outreach to the world.

“Our conversation allowed us to personally thank Pope Francis for providing leadership and a vision that has captivated our hearts and emboldened us as in our own mission and service to the church,” the nuns said in a statement. “We were also deeply heartened by Pope Francis’s expression of appreciation for the witness given by Catholic sisters through our lives and ministry and will bring that message back to our members.” —David Gibson, Religion News Service



Sister Sharon Holland

PHOTO COURTESY OF LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

## Army chaplains need training to help suicidal soldiers

Chaplains, who are part of the army’s first line of defense against suicide, say they need more training in how to prevent soldiers from killing themselves, according to a RAND Corporation survey published in early April.

Nearly all the chaplains and chaplain assistants surveyed said they have dealt with suicidal soldiers, and most said they encourage troubled soldiers to get help. Because of confidentiality, roughly half said they would be reluctant to alert someone in the chain of command about the soldier, and roughly a third said they would not call a crisis hotline for the GI.

In addition, the study found that chaplains and chaplain assistants hold some of the same negative views about therapy that often discourage soldiers from seeing a behavioral health specialist. Most in the survey agreed that service members who seek help for suicidal thoughts would be seen differently by their peers. About half said they would be embarrassed.

Researchers said they believe this may be why chaplains are reluctant to intervene when a soldier comes to them with signs of suicidal thinking. Forty-four percent of chaplains and 57 percent of chaplain assistants said they need training in suicide prevention treatment, the survey found.

“In this circumstance where people are going to them and using [them] like a behavioral health provider, let’s make sure they have a basic amount of competency,” said Rajeev Ramchand, lead author of the study.

Army spokeswoman Tatjana Christian said chaplains receive instruction in suicide intervention skills during their basic officer course. The Army Office of Chaplains is studying where there may be gaps in intervention practices, she said.

Annual numbers of suicides in the army began rising in 2004, peaking at 185 deaths among those on active duty in 2012—a suicide rate of about 30 per 100,000, more than double the rate for civilians. Numbers have since declined to



135 army suicides in 2014, about where they were in 2008.

The RAND study was posted online Tuesday in *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, which is published by the American Psychological Association. Researchers did an online survey of about 4,900 army chaplains and chaplain assistants and based their results on validated responses from about 1,500. The authors said there is scant research on chaplains and suicide prevention.

Last month, the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention released a study complaining about “meager” investments to understand and prevent suicide, the tenth-leading cause of death in America, claiming 40,000 lives each year.

The alliance, a private-public partnership formed in 2010, noted that the annual U.S. investment of \$72 million in suicide research pales in comparison with funding for other diseases that claim a similar number of American lives. Two examples cited by the group include \$222 million a year for influenza research, a disease that kills 30,700 annually, and \$304 million for hypertension studies for an illness that claims 56,000 lives per year.

The RAND study was paid for by the Pentagon, which is second only to the National Institutes of Health in funding suicide research. The findings were based on a 2012 online survey in which 41 percent of army chaplains participated. —Gregg Zoroya, *USA Today*

## Catholic Church in Kenya fights hunger by farming its vast land reserves

In an effort to fight hunger, the Roman Catholic Church in Kenya is making 3,000 acres of church-owned land available for commercial farming.

“We want to produce food, create employment, and improve quality of life for the people,” said Celestino Bundi, Kenya’s national director of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

This is the first time the church has entered into large-scale farming. It owns massive tracts of land across the country,



**MINISTRY FOR THE MARKET:** A woman picks tea at the Limuru Archdiocesan Farm, 25 miles northwest of Nairobi, Kenya. The farm, with its tea estates, dairy farming, and horticulture, provides lessons in commercial production.

most of which are idle and in the hands of dioceses, parishes, missionaries, and congregations.

“We have the will and the support of the community and government,” Bundi said. “I think time has come for Kenya to feed herself.”

For now, the church is creating farms that will grow maize and beans, as well as raise chickens and dairy cattle, for the church and the commercial market. The food produced by the church is expected to boost the national reserves and help reduce the number of people who go hungry.

An estimated 1.6 million of Kenya’s 42 million people need food assistance, the government said in a 2015 food security assessment report issued in February.

With such developments in Africa and the world, Pope Francis in 2014 called for changing the paradigm of aid and development policies.

The pontiff said defeating world hunger would require more than aid and donations. This vision is the basis of the Kenyan church initiative, Bundi said.

Some of the resources to be used for the project are from the Pontifical Mission Societies’ U.S. chapter, which is providing a low-interest loan to the Kenyan church.

About 25 miles northwest of Nairobi,

the Limuru Archdiocesan Farm, owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, provides some lessons for the church’s new initiative.

Until 2002, over 400 acres of land lay unused in an area where local people are poor, landless, and in great need of food.

Retired archbishop Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki of Nairobi turned the land into a farm that now feeds the community, provides employment, and supplies produce to surrounding markets.

In 2011, the farm started running a for-profit organization, producing vegetables, tea, milk, and animal feed.

“We employ 200 people, and the farm is able to pay them and sustain itself,” said Martin Nderitu, the farm manager. “The secret was to take a risk to expand and be persistent in production. We are making profits and expanding the farm.”

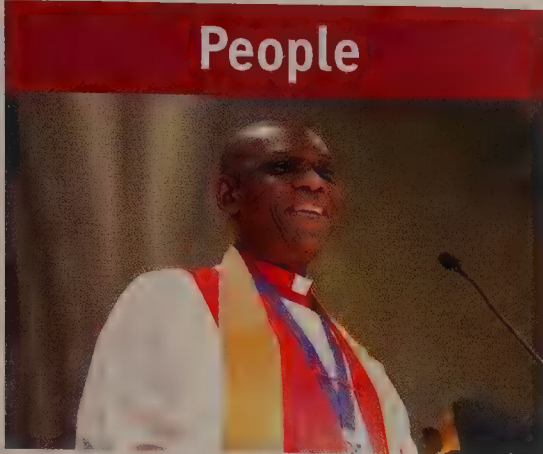
Nderitu said making more land available for farming is one of the best decisions by the Kenyan Catholic Church. “It will pay dividends,” he said. “But they must employ professionals to manage the farms.”

Bundi noted that he foresees some challenges. These include managing the project, paying back the loan, and changing congregations’ mind-set about the benefits of the project, which are for profit. —Fredrick Nzwilli, Religion News Service



## People

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL HUDSON



■ **Josiah Atkins Idowu-Fearon**, a Nigerian bishop from Kaduna, in April became the first African to be appointed as secretary general of the 85-million-member Anglican Communion.

"His position on traditional Anglicanism is very firm," said Bishop Julius Kalu of the Mombasa, Kenya, diocese. "This is good for us."

Kalu said the appointment had come at the right time, when African Anglicans needed a bigger voice within the communion.

"The church is growing fastest here," Kalu said. "We also have the largest membership."

His appointment to the mostly ambassadorial post drew criticism from groups that pointed to antigay statements by Idowu-Fearon and alleged that he spoke in favor of criminalizing gay and lesbian people.

"I have never supported the law in Nigeria that criminalizes the gay community, and I will never support it," Idowu-Fearon said in an April 6 statement. "The church is called to love and protect everyone without discrimination, 'love the person but hate the sin' whatever the sin may be, corruption, sexual sins of all kinds, misuse of power, or anything else."

According to Episcopal News Service, he called claims that he was antigay misleading.

He said in the statement that "the Bible judges culture, including African culture. As African Christians we must accept other cultures and the way they also understand the Bible's relationship with culture."

Idowu-Fearon also has a reputation as an expert on Christian-Muslim relations.

"Josiah is, above all, a man of communion, a careful listener, and a respec-

ter of the different ways in which we are called to articulate and live the good news of God in Jesus Christ," former Episcopal Church presiding bishop Frank Griswold told Episcopal News Service.

Idowu-Fearon has a Ph.D. in sociology from Nigeria's Ahmadu Bello University, a master's degree in Islamic theology from England's University of Birmingham, and a bachelor's degree in theology from Durham University, also in England. —Fredrick Nzwili, Religion News Service; added sources

■ **Cardinal Francis George**, former head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, died April 17 at age 78, after years of living with cancer. He was the first man to retire rather than die as archbishop of Chicago.

George, a Chicago native, became archbishop in 1997. He was seen by some as an antidote to the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who advocated a common ground Catholicism. In many ways, he served as a point man for Pope John Paul II, who was by then ailing, and for John Paul's doctrinal watchdog and theological adviser, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who would be elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005. Longtime Vatican expert John Allen called George the "American Ratzinger."

"George's clear and strongly stated positions on issues such as abortion, contraception, and the Catholic liturgy could be either celebrated or reviled—and he drew both reactions, repeatedly—but they could never be ignored," Allen wrote.

George made a name for himself not only as one of the hierarchy's sharpest minds and most outspoken advocates for orthodoxy, but as someone who could get things done.

After the clergy sexual abuse scandal broke in 2002, George helped push through an unprecedented set of policies, including a zero tolerance rule for abusive priests. Yet he himself got snagged by those policies when abuse scandals involving some of his own clergy erupted on his watch.

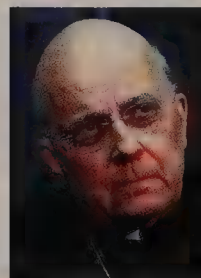


PHOTO COURTESY OF REUTERS/ALESSANDRO BIANCHI

George also helped push through controversial changes to the language of the mass, and he led the U.S. bishops from 2007 to 2010. He became a force behind the hierarchy's battles with the Obama administration over issues such as health-care reform, contraception, gay rights, and religious liberty. He retired in November 2014.

In a 1998 speech he said that "liberal Catholicism . . . has shown itself unable to pass on the faith in its integrity and [is] inadequate, therefore, in fostering the joyful self-surrender called for in Christian marriage, in consecrated life, in ordained priesthood." He said, "It no longer gives life."

In one of George's final interviews, with *America* magazine's Sister Mary Ann Walsh (herself battling cancer), he began by reflecting on this stage of life and being a retired archbishop facing a terminal illness.

"I have a sense that I'm being taught to let go," he said, "to put aside many of the concerns that have shaped my life, even as a bishop." —David Gibson, Religion News Service

■ **Lil Copan** has been named senior acquisitions editor for general trade at Eerdmans Publishing Company, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

She has worked in acquisitions for Abingdon Press, Ave Maria Press, and Paraclete Press, among others, and with authors such as Madeleine L'Engle and Lauren F. Winner. She acquired Frederick Buechner's *The Faces of Jesus* for Paraclete in 2004. Jana Riess credited her in a 2011 *Publishers Weekly* interview for having "brilliantly suggested" the concept for her book *Flunking Sainthood*.

"Eerdmans has continued to invite readers and generate new ideas, introducing valued voices of faith over the last century plus," Copan said.

Copan, a painter, also writes art commentary for the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*.

Jon Pott, Eerdmans' editor in chief, called Copan a "distinguished and creative" editor and said other members of the Eerdmans team count her as a "kindred spirit."



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# LIVING BY The Word

May 17, Ascension Sunday  
Luke 24:44-53

**AND HERE WE ARE.** It's the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke, in which Jesus meets with the disciples one last time and then ascends to heaven. Once again we have journeyed through the arrest, the trial, the betrayal, the death, and the resurrection—only to be left watching Jesus leave.

What do we witness when we circle back through this journey? That's the task Jesus leaves us with: "You are witnesses of these things." We are invited to look back at Jesus' life and ministry and to recollect the healing of the blind man, the feeding of the 5,000, the outcasts welcomed, the parables told. But surely our task is more than just reciting and remembering the events that have taken place. What are these things that Christ is calling us to witness?

We do receive a clue that in the course of the journey from arrest to resurrection, a change has taken place. Not so much a change in Jesus, but a change in ourselves, "a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins." This change that Jesus speaks of happened in three days. It took three days for sins to be forgiven, for hope to be made eternal, for everything to come to fulfillment.

It doesn't seem like enough time. Sometimes it's taken me more than three days just to complete a sermon. But Jesus says it is more than adequate.

In the fermentation process, it takes up to three days to notice any change. In the Korean church where I grew up, my mom and the other church ladies would make kimchi, gathering around huge bins of napa cabbage and salting each leaf in order to jumpstart the process. This was also a time for them to share news, stories, and prayers. Often you would find them either laughing so hard or weeping so deeply that I'm convinced some of their salty tears made their way into the kimchi.

Once the cabbage had absorbed some of the salt and wilted, they meticulously rubbed each leaf with red pepper spices. Then they packed them in glass jars so that the cabbage could ferment and transform into kimchi, microbes and molecular structure changing right before your eyes.

Kimchi in the early stages of fermentation resembles a crunchy, refreshing, spicy salad. As it continues to ferment, the smell becomes more pungent, the taste more sour, and the ingredients more amalgamated. At a certain point the kimchi becomes so sour or old that it has even been described as smelling like death.

This is when, in my opinion, kimchi is at its best. It's time for kimchi jjigae, a hot and spicy kimchi stew. What was once a cab-

bage side dish resurrects as a super comfort food. And it has to be made with old kimchi. New kimchi hasn't changed enough to provide the full, rich flavor that kimchi jjigae demands.

The fermentation process Jesus leads us through began with his birth, when we were rubbed with the frankincense of hope, packed with the myrrh of immense love, and left to ferment with the knowledge that our identity and our relationship with God were about to change. Through the ministry of Jesus Christ—every miracle, teaching, healing, and sharing of bread—we find ourselves changing, right down to our hearts, our microbes, and our molecular structure. We are fermenting. The odor is in the air. When it smells like death, we find new life.

Before Jesus ascends to heaven, he has a meal with his disciples—not once but twice. First he breaks bread with Cleopas and another follower at Emmaus, and then again with the disciples in Jerusalem. Jesus reveals himself and invites them to look at his hands and feet, to touch them. Why do we always find Jesus having a meal with his disciples?

When my mom began teaching me how to cook, she always said that the first step is eating. Eat the food. Let the flavors and the taste become a part of you. Eating my mom's cooking was more than learning how to cook; it was also a way of understanding my mom. She poured so much of herself into her cooking. If you know how to eat and know how food should taste, then you are ready to begin cooking that food for others.

"I'm sending to you what my Father promised," says Jesus, "but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power." It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "Stay, eat, and taste until you are ready to cook and share a meal with others."

Kimchi jjigae is not meant to be eaten alone. It is made in a huge pot and placed in the center of the table. The people gather around the table with their individual bowls of rice and dip their spoons into the communal pot of fermented goodness. In this week's Gospel reading, we find the disciples in the first steps of cooking, but a time is coming soon when they will be called to witness—to cook for themselves and to feed others.

Our task is to eat, taste, and dissect the flavors that we savor in the pot, so that we may come to understand the chef. By letting the taste sink in and challenge our taste buds, we discover flavors we never knew before. We give in to the fermentation process, to allow our hearts to be changed and our lives to be transformed so that we may share this meal with others—others who are not able to physically touch Jesus' hands and feet but are able to taste and share in the meal.

I have to admit: I still cannot cook Korean food very well. But I keep trying.



# Reflections on the lectionary

May 24, Day of Pentecost  
Acts 2:1-21

**I LOVE** a good birthday party. Not necessarily my own, but those of my kids. We don't throw elaborate birthday parties that cost an arm and a leg and require an incredible amount of planning. Ours are simple family affairs with grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. I usually make a cake inspired by Pinterest, and my mom cooks a feast that can feed a hundred. I think I love these parties because growing up, I didn't have extended family to celebrate such occasions. When my parents emigrated from Korea, it was just us—my parents, my sister, and me.

Pentecost is often referred to as the church's birthday. Whether your church is 145 years old like the one I serve or brand new as in Acts, Pentecost is when the gift of the Holy Spirit is given for all. What a gift, and what a party.

The invitation list is insane. Everyone is there: Galileans, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, even the Romans and Arabs. People are having such a good time that you would think they are drunk, but no! They have just received the most amazing party favors of prophecy, visions, and dreams.

The first birthday in Korean tradition is often the most celebrated. *Dol* or *doljanchi* is a ceremony in which the child is blessed with a prosperous future. A child's *dol* is an important milestone because before modern technology, the death rate for children was high. Many never had a first birthday at all.

Much of what happens at a child's *dol* is centered on dreams, visions, and hopes for that child. Fruit and colorful rice cakes are stacked high on plates to symbolize a life of prosperity. A child wears a traditional outfit called a *hanbok*, usually made out of a Korean fabric called *saekdong*—literally, “many-colored.” The pattern consists of rainbow stripes that call to mind our dreams for our children.

Also scattered on the table are assorted objects that represent other elements of prosperity. A paintbrush or book stands for wisdom; money stands for wealth; a long piece of thread means long life. Whatever the child chooses is the destiny the child claims.

Nowadays, people add to the table other objects that may represent a variety of vocations. My son chose a golf ball. Maybe that means he will be athletic or quick on his feet. My daughter decided to choose none of the intended objects, instead going straight for a plate of grapes. Maybe that means

she will always have a healthy appetite. I like to think that it means she will always choose the least obvious path and determine her own destiny.

On Pentecost, the table has been set before us. We may have the ability to choose the objects before us, but it is God who sets the table. So what does God envision for us? What is set on the table before us?

Sons and daughters will prophesy. The young will see visions. The elders will dream dreams. Servants, men, and women will have the Spirit poured onto them. Wonders will occur, and all will be saved.

The good news is that we don't have to choose. It is all made available to us—no matter our gender, age, and status. This Pentecostal event, the Spirit poured out among the people, grounds us in the past with the words of Joel and launches us into the future with the call to dream dreams and see visions.

But what do we dream? The *doljanchi* table links children to the past, where grandparents and parents choose objects that embody their hopes for them. The children, however, get to interject their own visions among the buffet of hopes and dreams.

We are reminded that the Spirit that was present at Pentecost is the same Spirit that is present with us now. Therefore, we are connected to that same call to live out a

How do you use the lectionary?  
Please take our short survey:  
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faithful life in which dreams and visions may soar. Our call is to continue to lay the ground and provide the space, so our dreams can blossom in others.

What is clear in Acts 2 is that a party is taking place—that dreams and visions are not meant to be dreamt alone but in a diverse community united in the Spirit. This task of dreaming involves all of who we are. We hear and feel it, “like the howling of a fierce wind.” We see and feel it, like “individual flames of fire.” We speak it in our native language, yet it is understood by foreigners.

I surely know that I live off the dreams and hopes that my parents had for me when they moved to this country. This has empowered me to continue to provide that same gift to my children as they discover their call, dreams, and visions.

*The author is Theresa Cho, copastor of St. John's Presbyterian Church in San Francisco.*



For my father, WW2 was never over

# War without end

by Barbara Wagner Dueholm

IN THE SUMMER of 1998, my parents and I took a road trip from Wisconsin to Georgia to visit the newly opened National Prisoner of War Museum in Andersonville. When my siblings learned I'd offered to do this, their collective reaction was that I needed to get my head examined. My father had been shot out of the sky twice in World War II; he escaped a German POW camp and then did clandestine work in Nazi-occupied Europe. As compelling as this history was, it rested uneasily alongside our lived experience with a man tormented by his memories and his conscience.

To many, especially his brothers in arms, he was hail-fellow-well-met. He was the earthy bard of the local Eagles Club and a founding member of his ex-POW chapter in eastern Wisconsin. He drove veterans to appointments at the Milwaukee VA Hospital and was welcomed and respected in the honor guard at veterans' funerals too numerous to mention.

Our family's inner circle, however, knew him differently. To us, he was mercurial—loud, brash, and exacting but also often silent and sullen. His anger could approach the edge of violence; he was the terror of our household. He rigidly demanded our obedience to his authority while scorning to offer his own to anyone, including a long string of employers.

According to my mother, the man who returned to her in 1945 was completely different from the one she had known. What happened to produce this Jekyll and Hyde in our midst?

**H**enry Wagner, commonly known as Hank, enlisted in August 1941. He was already "romancing" my mother, Rosemary, as he put it, but he knew a war was coming, and he wanted to be able to choose his branch: the Army Air Forces, predecessor to the U.S. Air Force. Besides, Depression-era Kiel, Wisconsin, had not much to offer a parentless young man, even one with a high school diploma.

Rosemary was just 17 at the time, too young for marriage. But to keep the flames of affection burning, she started writing Hank letters and sending photos; he responded in kind. It was a letter-writing time, and they wrote many.

Hank describes December 7 as the day the roof fell in. He was sent off from his Mississippi airfield for the eventual destination of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. On a mission in May 1943, his plane was shot down, and he and two other surviving crew members parachuted into the North Pacific. He sustained multiple injuries, including a concussion that left him unconscious for three days.

After six months of convalescence, Hank was offered an assignment as a gunnery instructor on a base in Utah. He declined, believing he wasn't cut out to be an instructor—and assuming that some other safe, stateside assignment would emerge. Instead he found himself in Ardmore, Oklahoma, training as an aerial gunner on B-17s. They flew in tight formation with dozens of other planes. Many air crews crashed in training. Those that survived were ultimately headed for the United Kingdom. In a touching display of hope over experience, Hank and Rosemary married in Ardmore in December 1943. In February, their correspondence resumed when Hank headed overseas to join the Mighty Eighth Air Force at an American air base in southern England.

On his first mission, flying over Germany but not yet to the target in Berlin, Hank's plane took a hit, and an engine burst into flame. The pilot and copilot dropped out of formation and went into a steep dive, from 23,500 feet to 3,000. "It blew out the fire," Hank told me, "but we were all alone." They barely made it back to England, flying low until they reached a landing strip just beyond the white cliffs of Dover. They had lost another engine along the way; their B-17 was scrap. "Everything was expendable," Hank explained, a sad wartime truth that applied to men as well as equipment.

Mission after mission followed. In May 1944 Hank's entire flight crew was transferred to the 15th Air Force, based in Italy. They flew missions in Romania, France, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. "We hit a target on the edge of Switzerland," Hank said. "You could actually see it. It would have been very easy to glide into Switzerland and sit out the war there." Hank was eager to finish his required 50 missions—the number had steadily increased from the original 25—and to rotate back stateside. So when his usual crew was on a rest rotation, he and the copilot signed up to fly as replacements with a different crew on July 16, 1944.

*Barbara Wagner Dueholm is retired from the public broadcasting division of the University of Wisconsin Extension.*

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR







New enlistee Hank Wagner with Rosemary in 1943

It was Hank's 46th mission. He never completed it. After dropping bombs on the target in Vienna, his plane took a direct flak hit. Some crew members went down with the plane; Hank was among those who escaped by parachute. "I landed on a Luftwaffe air base," he said, "which should be against the law in any war." A German soldier pointed a gun at his head as soon as he hit the ground. "He didn't know many words of English but said, 'For you, the war is over.'"

The crew members were taken by train to Dulag Luft, a central interrogation center where the staff spoke fluent English. "I guess I lipped off to the wrong guy," Hank said, "and I got sent to Berlin, where I stayed for another ten days." The interrogators made constant threats. "The rest of the guys either kept their mouths shut or cooperated," Hank explained, "and they got sent to Stalag Luft IV two weeks ahead of me." When he finally appeared at the POW camp, located in present-day Poland, one of them asked where the hell he'd been. "I took a side trip to Berlin," he replied, four armed Nazi escorts at his side. "The Krauts wanted me to take some pictures."

Our drive south to Andersonville was uneventful. When Hank was in good spirits he was a garrulous man, rarely running out of things to chat about. Rosemary crocheted quietly in the backseat, coughing whenever I pushed the car above the speed limit. Our third day out, we arrived at the museum.

The National POW Museum appears barracks-like and ominous, in contrast to its serene rural setting. That day, the reception hall was empty. Tapping in Hank's name and service number at the computer kiosk yielded a "no records" response. Hank shrugged it off. (I learned later that his service record was among those lost in a 1973 fire at a records depository in St. Louis.) The exhibit space was festooned with keepsakes and memorabilia, many of them from World War II. Hank walked silently through, stopping here and there to read an exhibit description.

At the end of one aisle was a wall with a quote from a captured German soldier: "After serving on the eastern front, being a prisoner of war in the US was like taking the rest cure." That stopped Hank in his tracks; he spun around and marched

out of the building. Taking deep pulls on a cigarette, he barked: "They got treated like goddamned houseguests, and we were over there being starved and shot!" Not true, but close enough; German POWs sent to the United States were used mainly on agricultural and similar manual work details. Not a few ended up in Wisconsin, where German was still spoken by a wide swath of the population. Prisoners were housed humanely, and even during wartime there was always enough to eat.

But Hank already knew all that. Why had this particular inscription set him off?

At Stalag Luft IV in early August 1944, Hank witnessed about 200 American prisoners running toward the compound. They had just arrived at a nearby train station, and "they were forced at bayonet point by German guards to run at top speed to the camp," said Hank.

Hauptman Pickard [a captain later charged with war crimes but never prosecuted] was riding back and forth along the lines shouting at the guards from his motorbike, telling them to keep the men running and threatening to shoot the guards if they didn't keep prodding the men on at full speed. One of them dropped to the ground; I could see it easily from where I was standing. When he fell, a German guard prodded him with his bayonet in the back, in his buttocks, and in his legs. He crawled for a short way, and then two American prisoners picked him up a short distance outside the gate and carried him right into the hospital. He had 62 bayonet wounds, and there were about 12 other men who were also mistreated in this same way on the run.

Hank was coaxed back into the museum, but before long he again left the building, not to return. I suggested a drive through the original Civil War prison camp, with its monuments and plaques; he wouldn't even have to leave the car. This was soon aborted as well. Off we went to see the avenue of flags, only for Hank to again bellow, "Get me the hell out of here!"

His reaction should not have taken me by surprise. Several years earlier he wanted to see the movie *Memphis Belle*, in which a WWII B-17 crew flies its last mission before being rotated back to the States. Partway through the film, amid graphic images of the flight crew in extreme circumstances, Hank got up and walked out. For him, the film was over.

So Andersonville quickly receded in our rearview mirror. The first night of the return trip found Hank and me at a hotel bar in Knoxville, after a mostly silent dinner with Rosemary. "If you knew the things I've done, you wouldn't have a thing to do with me," he said. "You would not cross the street to spit on me." There was an emotional cancer eating away at him, and it wasn't the POW experience—which, wrenching as it was, lasted less than three months. What had irreparably wounded Hank's psyche was what he did after escaping.

Having grown up in rural eastern Wisconsin and attended German primary school, Hank read, wrote, and spoke the language fluently. In October 1944, he was approached by an escape committee inside the camp. The committee had already



talked to a French flier named Gilbert Guitlmain, who was a friend of Hank's. Hank had a day or so to think it over.

A horse-drawn cart carried the garbage out of the camp on a regular schedule. The driver always parked his wagon near the kitchen, out of sight of the guard towers, and then came in for a cup of coffee. It was the perfect opportunity for Hank and Gilbert—Hank called him Frenchy—to make their way to the wagon and lie on their backs, carefully placing flattened Red Cross boxes over themselves. Then other POWs piled the garbage on top of them.

The cart driver came back to take the load away. Hank was convinced the man was in on the escape—the British had been in POW camps since 1940, and Hank believed they had their ways of engaging some of the local population. “Away we went,” said Hank,

Right through the gate. Nobody checked it because he had done this for God knows how many times. We got to the dump. It was the type of wagon used for grain or sand: there was a lever that was pulled and the bottom drops out, like a bomb bay. There was 16 feet between the wheels, so you just rolled. This driver must have been well instructed. He didn't look back; he just kept right on going. By the time he turned his team around to go back for another load, we were in the brush, and he never saw us. I just hoped the old fellow lived.

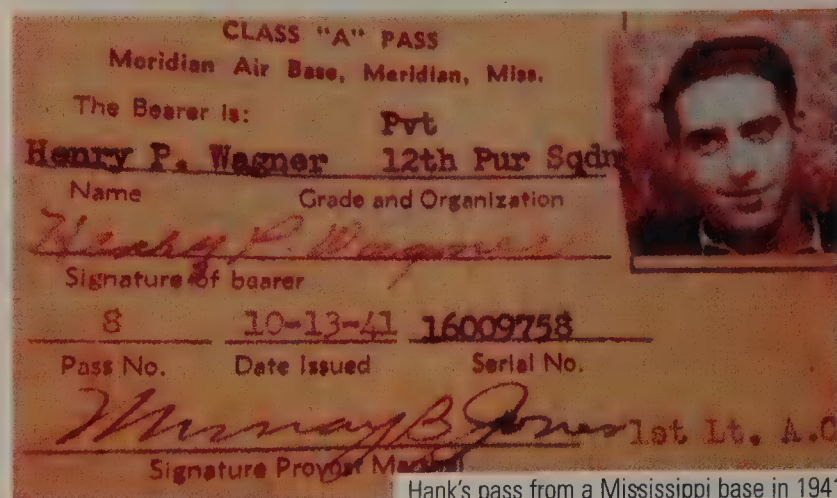
Hank was 24 years old, an American GI in civilian clothes, at large in enemy territory.

“If I'd realized what being at large meant, I wouldn't have agreed to it,” Hank confessed to me in Knoxville. What it meant was conducting clandestine activities in Nazi-occupied Europe, a very dangerous proposition—but perhaps made to sound less so if one knew the enemy's language and could blend in. Hank's assignment was to blow up buildings, ammunition stores, supply depots, and train bridges—and not get caught. Perhaps this would be preferable to the misery of the POW camp. In any case, Hank never explained why he agreed to the escape, only that he forever regretted that he had.

Hank and Frenchy's first night at large was spent in a barn, he said. The farmer came early in the morning to milk his cows, accompanied by his dog. Knowing they'd be discovered, Hank used his knife to take both of their lives. Then he and Frenchy fled. In hindsight, Hank believed he should have tried to talk his way out of that barn instead. But in the moment, in a panic, he did not.

They met up with other at-large personnel. According to Hank, “Frenchy and I got indoctrinated.” The French dropped them a piece of radio equipment, with more drops to follow.

Every night we got a radio code which Frenchy understood; we got a drop one evening of explosives, and there were caps with it. You put it on a train track and the pressure caps would blow the engine and tracks all to hell. There were ammunition dumps pinpointed to us, and you work at night and get around that dump. There are usually guards around, and if you couldn't lure them away you did away with them



Hank's pass from a Mississippi base in 1941

one way or another. Then you blow up the dump, but you better get the hell out of there because they'll start looking for you. Eventually we got to most of the sites. We raised general hell.

In February 1945, Hank, Frenchy, and another man were sent to meet a group of POWs on a forced march from Stalag Luft IV. “It took us four or five nights to get there,” said Hank. “We sat still during the daytime. We were to find this column, operate on the fringes of it, see what they needed. If it got too bad, they would pull a raid in the area.” Eventually the orders were changed, and they were sent

## Hank's deeds in Nazi-occupied Europe haunted him throughout his life.

toward Berlin; then another change found them heading toward Austria.

By this late stage of the war, Germany was enlisting boys barely into their teens. Hank and Frenchy came upon such a group of teenagers bathing themselves in a small pond, their German army tunics and rifles placed neatly on the shore. For those boys, the war was instantly over.

Hank's breaking point, he said in Knoxville, came in April. He and Frenchy had planted explosives on a train bridge and retreated a half kilometer or so to watch their handiwork. As the train crossed the bridge and the charges blew, Hank saw that the overturned cars had Red Cross markings on them. Ashes from his wobbling cigarette tumbled onto our table at the bar.

I reminded him that the Nazis did this all the time, that they marked their trains with Red Cross symbols so they wouldn't be bombed or strafed. “Dad,” I said, “they were *Nazis*!” No, he said, this was an actual Red Cross train. “How could you know that?” I asked. “You were ordered to blow it up, and you did”—an inadvertent and agonizing reminder of just how like the enemy he had become.

A farmer told Hank and Frenchy that the Americans were at the Elbe River, 45 kilometers away. They headed that way, soon meeting up with others they knew.



We picked up a guy from St. Louis, too. He didn't make the Elbe River. We traveled for a day or two, and we sat down in the woods at night. We heard tanks off in the distance but didn't know whose they were. Either the Americans or the British started lobbing shells over the woods where we were. It didn't take but a minute, and the Germans started firing back. I guess this was about as scared as I have ever been in my life. During the night someone said, I hope they don't cut the fuses short on those, because they'll drop in the woods right here. It didn't happen, fortunately.

The group approached the British lines near the Elbe; Hank went out to meet them, weapon in hand. "Somebody spotted me and immediately jumped in a Jeep and came toward me," he said. "It was a frightening feeling, looking at the business end of a 50 caliber." It took a while for the British to verify their identity. When they did,

they gave us something to eat and passed us on seven or eight miles to a Yank outfit. We again went through the identification process, and when they finally decided that we were Americans, we were treated with the best. You would not believe how their demeanor changed! We got food, we got cigarettes; they couldn't do enough for us.

That afternoon, Hank and the others were flown to England. They were covered with lice, and they went through DDT disinfectant. The next day they landed in Washington, D.C., where the Counter Intelligence Corps questioned them. "They wanted our life stories," said Hank, "our routes, names of German guards—anything and everything we could remember. It got pretty hectic, a goddammit situation. There wasn't anything they could do to us, but they threatened." He was ordered to "take to his grave" the information he disclosed about his period at large. Needless to say, he disobeyed.

**H**ank's brief and bloody time at large haunted him the rest of his life. "You don't have to scratch a man very hard," he told me in Knoxville, "to expose the animal underneath." His experience haunted those who lived with him as well.

Rosemary experienced a traumatic journey of her own. She was notified in August 1944 that Hank's plane had been shot down and by September that he was at Stalag Luft IV. She received his personal effects in December, along with the War Department's notification that he was now missing in action. In May she

was told that her husband had been liberated on April 16; a subsequent telegram said he was being returned and would contact her. What she found was a man who weighed 97 pounds and had a hard time sleeping or keeping food down. She said the soft-spoken but often devilish young man she knew had disappeared.

Hank's nightmares lessened over the years, but they never truly left him. Physical illness, depression, rage, weeks or months of total silence—with the exception of alcoholism, he suffered it all. As Nicholas Shakespeare has eloquently written, the survivors pay with their conscience.

Hank mellowed a bit in old age, seeming to enjoy the company of his grandchildren more than he ever allowed himself to do with his own children. But sadly, he never attained his own amazing grace. He was never a religious man, but even in the very last days of his life he seemed to retain just enough faith to fear damnation—yet not enough to imagine himself forgiven. Hank had an unhealed wound, left by the enormity of the death and destruction that he witnessed—and caused. For Hank, and for all of us who lived with him, the war was never, ever over.

Upon returning to Wisconsin in the summer of 1945, one of the first things Hank did was to ask Rosemary for all the letters he had written her, a correspondence so voluminous she kept it in a large dress box. He took the box out to the gravel-covered driveway, covered it in gasoline, and lit it on fire. **CL**

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Middle East expert Joshua Landis

# A violent sorting out

**JOSHUA M. LANDIS**, *associate professor at the University of Oklahoma and director of its Center for Middle East Studies, has served as a consultant to the State Department on Middle East issues. He is president of the Syrian Studies Association and runs the blog Syria Comment.*

## How did you become an expert on Syria, of all places?

I lived in Beirut and in Saudi Arabia for the first ten years of my life. My father worked for Citibank. After college I got a teaching job rather serendipitously in Lebanon in 1979, when Lebanon was in the middle of a civil war. I started learning Arabic and trying to figure out why the Lebanese were shooting each other.

Two years later I got a Fulbright scholarship to the University of Damascus. I was there in 1982 when the Muslim Brotherhood took over the third-largest city in Syria. The regime smashed it, killing perhaps 20,000 people. Then I pursued Middle Eastern studies at Harvard and Princeton and wrote about Syria.

## You saw early on the issues that were shaping Syria and Lebanon.

Right. And the civil war that I witnessed in Lebanon had similarities to what is going on today in Syria in that it was a sectarian struggle.

All the regimes in the Levant area of the Middle East were run by religious minorities: Lebanon by the Maronites, Iraq by the Sunnis, Syria by the Alawites. You could even say that the Jews were a minority in Palestine that turned themselves into a majority.

## Autocratic rule by a minority sets up a very unstable situation?

Yes, it is unstable. We've been seeing over the past 30 years the popular demand to get rid of these minority regimes. In Lebanon it took a 15-year civil war to do it.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein was powerful enough not to be overthrown, despite many attempts, until the United States invaded and threw the Sunnis—who were 20 percent of the country—to the bottom of society and catapulted the Shi'ites—the 60 percent majority—to the top. That unleashed an unholy sectarian war.

## How has Syrian president Bashar Hafez al-Assad been able to stay in power so long?

In large measure because he's been preparing for this sort of uprising for years. He placed Alawites, the Islamic sect he

belongs to, in the top security positions in the military and in the intelligence agency so that they would not abandon him in a crisis. By contrast, the military in Egypt abandoned Mubarak and in Tunisia they abandoned Ben Ali. All through the Arab Spring countries the militaries turned against their dictators—but not in Syria, because the Alawite minority understood that they would be swept away were the president to fall. They also have strong allies in Iran and Russia and support from other minorities.

## Some Christians even support the Assad regime.

Christians make up perhaps 5 percent of Syria's population. That figure used to be more like 14 percent, after World War II. And there are the Druze, the Ismailis, and the Kurds. But the Arab Sunnis are 70 percent of the population, by far the major-

**“The entire Middle East is in the midst of a nation-building process.”**

ity. There are quite a few Sunnis who support the regime, oddly enough, because over 40 years many people worked for the regime or are implicated in its rule. If the opposition were to take power, many of the Assad supporters would lose their jobs and probably their property as well.

## What interests do Western powers have in Syria?

Historically, very little. Certainly the United States has had limited interests. We've imposed sanctions on the country since the 1970s and have almost no trade with it. Our main interest is to not allow the chaos and violence in Syria to bring down friendly regimes in the neighborhood. And, of course, more recently our interest is in curbing ISIS and radicalism in the region.

## What can be done?

President Obama has made the assessment that it would be

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damaging to the United States to try to organize a full-scale occupation of Syria to disarm the radicals and construct a new government—the sort of thing we attempted in Iraq (and didn’t attempt in Libya). His aim is to pursue a very narrow policy of counterterrorism, which some Americans argue we’re good at. We can listen to the terrorists’ phone calls, track them, and keep them in databases. If they come to the West trying to kill Americans, we’ll kill them first.

The president thinks this is a much less expensive and more doable policy than trying to somehow fix Syria and sort out the ethnic hostilities, defuse Islamism, and construct a liberal government along the lines the West would like.

#### **The president has spoken of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS. Is that feasible?**

I think the degrading is going on. Destroying ISIS is not feasible—not with the policies that are now being pursued.

President Bush wanted to destroy Islamic extremism and was willing to spend trillions of dollars to do it in Afghanistan and Iraq with an occupation. He believed that effort would lead to power sharing and the emergence of democratic governments that would have a domino effect in the Middle East—democracies breaking out all over.

#### **That didn’t work out.**

The United States spent a lot of money on the effort. It managed to put the Shi’ites in power in Iraq, so we were partly successful. But that hasn’t brought liberalism to the Middle East, and it hasn’t been an antidote to extremist Islamism. In fact, it has inflamed Islamism. Al-Qaeda is now well ensconced in Iraq. ISIS, a breakaway group from al-Qaeda, now controls

one-third of Iraq and one-third of Syria. That is a direct by-product of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Fifteen of the top 20 officers under Caliph al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, are former members of the Baathist Party in Iraq who were thrown out of power when the United States overthrew Saddam, and most of them spent long periods of time in American prisons.

#### **Are you saying there’s a revenge factor for these ISIS leaders?**

They don’t like America, but their main goal is to rule the Middle East and not to be ruled by the Shi’ites who were put in power by the United States in Iraq and who pushed the Baathists out of government in the country.

#### **You have said elsewhere that military intervention by the United States in Syria would be a disaster. Why?**

Theoretically, if you had NATO and international support, lots of money, and a willingness to stay for 20 or 30 years, you could rearrange Syrian society, rebuild its economy, provide people with education, and build a middle class and a new government. Obviously, the United States is not going to do that because we have had almost no interest in Syria.

Throwing arms into the area in the hope that somehow good people are going to end up on top is a very risky policy and one that’s leading to the breakdown of Syrian society and the growth of jihadism.

#### **Is there anything that the United States can do or should do?**

It should spend a lot more money on helping and educating the refugees. The United States needs to set a clear agenda for the regional powers that are supporting the radicals. Turkey, for



example, has been allowing al-Qaeda and ISIS to move back and forth across its territory. And Arabs in the Persian Gulf states have been pouring money into all kinds of jihadist groups.

**You've talked in other places about a great "sorting out" happening in the Middle East. What do you mean?**

What's going on in Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Iraq—the entire Levant—is a nation-building process. It's similar to what happened at the end of World War I when major empires were destroyed.

World War I in many ways was an empire-destroying war—it dismantled the Russian empire, the German empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the Ottoman empire. The 1919 Paris Peace Conference at the end of the war drew borders rather haphazardly. The result was a series of multiethnic, multisectarian countries stretching from Poland to Palestine. These new borders and new nation states jumbled different peoples together, many of whom did not want to live with each other. This led to great tensions and the emergence of fascist and supernationalist movements. With the rise of Hitler all this exploded.

With World War II there was a great sorting out in Europe. Poland was 64 percent Polish before the war, but by the end of the war it was almost 100 percent Polish. Six million Jews had already been killed in this region. Thirteen million Germans were ethnically cleansed from Central Europe in just two years, between 1945 and 1947. A third of Czechoslovakia was made up of minorities, but by the end of the war the minorities were all gone. That's the pattern in Ukraine and Hungary, too. In Yugoslavia, Tito acted as a little emperor, and he held his mosaic together with coercion, but as soon as he was swept away the nation exploded into a very brutal ethnic war and was chopped into seven countries.

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## Pool

My gift for his fiftieth birthday,  
a Japanese maple, buds swollen  
and ready to release first leaves.

After planting he digs a small  
pool underneath, lines it  
with cement edged with rocks.

This mirror, shaped like a uterus,  
reflects the tree as it rises,  
the soft green lace spreading

its wings. "Womb," we whispered,  
little girls in church singing  
the word, that secret place which

under the bare branches of December,  
holds the sun, moon, and stars.

Jean Janzen

The same sorting out of ethnic groups has been and is happening in the Middle East. Half of Israeli citizens are Jews who came from the Middle East, where every major capital had a large Jewish neighborhood before World War I or before World War II. These Jews were caught between the hammer and anvil of Arab nationalism and Zionism. And almost every one of those Jewish neighborhoods is gone. There are a few Jews left in Morocco, Istanbul, and Iran, but the Jews in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt are gone.

**Christians are leaving too.**

There aren't many Palestinian Christians left, and most Iraqi Christians have left. About 60,000 Christians in Iraq's Mosul were kicked out in one day with the ISIS conquest. The Yazidis have been enslaved or forced to convert or have fled. And Syria's largest city, Aleppo, in the north, was well over 20 percent Christian after World War I. Many Armenians had fled

**"You don't want to set up  
refugee camps that become  
cauldrons of injustice."**

there from Turkey; Anatolia was 20 percent Christian before World War I. By the end of the Turkish revolution, which ended in 1922, Atatürk kicked the Greek army out and in the process ethnically cleansed the country of Christians. The Armenians had already been ethnically cleansed, so those 20 percent are gone. In Turkey less than 1 percent are Christians today, and Christians have not been allowed to build churches.

This sorting out simplifies the life of these countries. (The United States had its sorting-out process too—it got rid of Native Americans and other challengers.)

**So the outlook is bleak for minority groups?**

Space can be created for minority groups. Space could have been created for a Palestinian state in half of Israel, for example, but the Palestinians are increasingly being pushed out. It takes a commitment from the international community to save these minorities, and the international community ultimately doesn't care.

**If you were asked to advise the Obama administration on Syria, what would you say?**

I would say: try to help Syria's neighbors settle as many Syrians as they can, and help them get educated so they don't become a cauldron of future terrorists and freedom fighters.

**Some Westerners think the Islamic world needs to go through  
■ Reformation or Enlightenment of sorts. What do you think?**

The dominant ideologies in the region are still absolutist and stem from the Qur'an, providing a religious justification for action. The region resembles Europe in the early modern period after the Reformation. Europe was embroiled in religious wars after the rise of Protestantism—from the late 1400s until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Finally Catholics agreed that Protes-



tant princes could be Protestant, that Protestants could build churches and worship, and that they weren't an abomination.

In a way the Enlightenment has begun in the Middle East. Look at the big debate in Iran today: President Rouhani says that he should be the true leader because elections brought him to power. And he wants to make a deal with the Americans. But Supreme Leader Khamenei says no, I'm the supreme leader, and God has empowered me, and this is a divine republic, an Islamic country.

Does authority stem from God or from the people? That debate is going on everywhere in the Middle East. And Shi'ites and Sunnis have to find an accommodation, a way both can exist under their version of a "separation of church and state."

### **So the fact that this debate is going on provides ~~some~~ hope?**

It does provide hope. How do you encourage the debate? It requires education, opportunity, a solid middle class. Putting sanctions on countries is counterproductive. We had sanctions on Syria for decades. The estimates are that it reduced the GDP by 2 percent a year. We thought that Syria would then do a pirouette, leave Iran's sphere of influence, make peace with Israel, and love America because of a desire to get out from under the sanctions. It didn't lead to that; it led to civil war and a breakdown.

We put sanctions on Sudan, we put sanctions on Libya, we put sanctions on many countries, and it's not led to the outcomes we wanted because we've impoverished people. And we're doing it to Iran today. It may lead to a good outcome, but it could break the country.

### **How important are the youthful demographics in many of these countries?**

Social scientists who study age have concluded that a revolution has a more than 50 percent chance of leading to a democratic transition if the median age of the population is 30 years old or older. In countries like Syria and Iraq, however, the median age is 21 years old. In Egypt it's 24; in Gaza and Yemen it's 18.

### **So the younger the population, the more likely that extremists will prevail?**

Yes, because the younger people want radical change, and they're willing to risk a lot because they don't have a lot invested in the society. It makes more sense to go through a revolution if you're young, because even if it takes 15 years to sort things out, you'll be only 35 then and still have a future. But if you're 50 and experience a revolution, and it only gets sorted out after 20 years, you're dead. It's hard for us to imagine what it's like to have a revolution in a country where the median age is 21.

### **Where do you see Israel fitting into this major sorting out in the Middle East?**

Israel has gone through a sorting out, although not completely. The Jews were one-third of the population in 1948 when Israel got independence and the British left. They've made themselves into a very powerful major-

ity. The Palestinians have largely lost, and it doesn't look like a two-state solution is in the offing. It looks like the Palestinians are going to live in some form of subjugation for a long time.

This sorting out is long and bloody. It's been long and bloody in Israel, and it's going to be long and bloody in much of the neighborhood. In Lebanon, the sorting is not over. Christians still retain 50 percent of all seats in Parliament—Sunnis and Shi'ites each get one-fourth of the seats—yet Christians are less than a third of the population.


There are over a million Sunni Syrian refugees in Lebanon, a country of 4 million people. That has completely thrown off the sectarian balance. Once those Syrian refugees get their feet on the ground and a generation has been brought up in Lebanon who feel Lebanese and not Syrian, they're not going to stand for the political arrangement.

### **Should the United States allow many more Syrian refugees to come here than what we have so far?**

The entire world has to do more to try to alleviate these pressures. You can't just hold people in a tent. In the 19th century those people would have been able to leave and go to the New World. Today that's not the case; nobody wants immigrants. The world is filled up; we have good borders with fences, and we're building one with Mexico today to keep out the press of humanity from the south.

Look at Gaza: it's a ward of the entire West Bank, it's a ward of the international community. It doesn't produce anywhere near the wealth that it consumes. You don't want to set up refugee camps that become permanent cauldrons of injustice.

### **European countries haven't done a great job of assimilating immigrants, have they?**

Well, they've taken on a lot of Muslims very quickly. In Sweden, for example, 20 percent of the population was born outside the country. In America the figure is only 13 or 14 percent. European nations are trying to figure out how to be multicultural societies after being rather homogenous. It's difficult to do. Every time the United States got close to having a 20 percent immigrant population—in the 1920s and a few other times—anti-immigrant parties have grown fairly strong. It's not an easy process. 

— Richard A. Kauffman



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How the Bible speaks of the divine

# God in ordinary words

by Peter J. Leithart

**THE CATEGORY** of “relation” has long been central to trinitarian theology, but in recent theology it has become a transcendental category, the leading feature not only of divine life but also of created life. Human beings made in the image of the triune God are analogically “relational” beings, and relationality is said to characterize the nonhuman world as well.

However, critics of this approach—Kathryn Tanner and Lewis Ayres stand out for their clarity—argue that since God and humans are different, the move from talk of God’s relationality to human relationships is not straightforward. Because of the gap between God and human beings, ordinary language does not apply to God in the same way it does to humans. What does *equal* mean in the statement “divine persons are equal”? What does *person* or *relation* mean when applied to God? Divine persons are their relations, but human beings exist, Tanner says, before the relations they have among themselves. Further, divine persons have a fixed relationality that is not characteristic of human beings: the Father is no one’s Son, and the Son will never be a Father.

Ayres likewise objects that attempts at trinitarian ontology are unclear about their concept of analogy. A proper concept of analogy must both honor the Creator-creature distinction and recognize the presence of God within his creation. Because of the differences between God and humans, terms like *relation* cannot be used univocally when applied to one or the other.

Ayres is also concerned that relational ontologies bypass the classical emphasis on contemplative purification, involving both meditation on scripture, with attention to its unfolding revelation, and participation in the life of the church. Relational ontologies too often treat trinitarian patterns of life as if they were blueprints that could be grasped by just anyone and applied to some human grouping.

I should note that both Tanner and Ayres believe that trinitarian theology, properly understood and used, does provide resources for understanding creation and human relationality. Tanner’s concern is largely to emphasize God’s initiative in restoring human relations. Humans do not imitate but participate in the divine communion. Thus she highlights the mission of the Son and Spirit. The relations of the divine persons in the economy of redemption affect human relations: “A life empowered by the Spirit in service to the mission of the Father for the world means that Jesus is with and for us, and that we, in turn, are to be with and for one another.” Thus the mission does bring in a “new community” whose “way of being is what

the Trinitarian relations as they show themselves in the economy . . . amount to in human relational terms.”

Having made proper qualifications, Ayres too concludes that “the divine relationships certainly should provide material that should be of immense help in shaping our vision of the world” and can “serve as a guide for our engagement of ontological thought.” Created things do reflect God, but we see that reflection rightly when “the grasping is part of our move towards the Creator.”

**S**till there are substantive problems with Tanner’s and Ayres’s objections. Specifically, Tanner fails to reckon with the import of the most important biblical passages. She cites Jesus’ prayer that “they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11, 22) but concludes that this may only indicate “the centrality of Christ, and of his relations with the Father, for our

## Scripture shows no anxiety about using analogies for God—like Rock and Sun.

relations with the Father.” She ignores the critical text (v. 21), where Jesus asks the Father with whom he is one by mutual indwelling that the disciples might be one “just as” (*kathos*) “you, Father, are in me and I in you.”

Tanner is correct to stress that the image of divine life among the disciples utterly depends on the missions of the Son and Spirit, by which the disciples share in the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, and she is also correct to stress that the interpersonal relations expressed in the mission come, by the power of the Spirit, to characterize the life of believers. But she weakens Jesus’ prayer concerning the result of this mission: that the common life of the disciples would come to bear the imprint of the eternal perichoretic relation of the Father and Son.

The more general problem with both Tanner and Ayres, and with many of their allies, lies in their implied notions of the

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Creator-creature distinction and of analogy. The objections arise, I submit, from a faulty doctrine of creation.

Scripture uses many words and names to portray God, his character, and his actions. Many of the descriptions of God are applications of created terms to God: God is Rock, Light, Sun, Shield, and so on. He stands in relation to humanity and Israel in ways describable in terms of human relations: he is King, Father, Lord, Husband.

Though the words must be taken in an analogical sense, scripture exhibits no anxiety about using them. Nowhere in scripture is there any hint that such analogies and figures are incapable of telling the truth about God, nor do we find any hint of the gymnastics typical of theological discussions of analogy (e.g., the common claim that God is infinitely dissimilar to whatever we compare him to). Scripture claims that many of these terms are God's own self-descriptions (e.g., Gen. 15:1), and naively supposes that human language can accurately reveal God.

The import of these descriptions seems straightforward: God is rocklike and shieldlike, kinglike and fatherlike in some unspecified but meaningful way. How he is such is left to context

and narrative. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). More mysteriously, he is the Rock that begot Israel (Deut. 32).

How it is that scripture is so very unconcerned about the problems that have preoccupied theologians for many centuries? I suggest that the Bible is unself-conscious about its language because of the assumed view of creation and human nature, and therefore of human language.

All created things were made by God, designed after his Wisdom and Logos. As such, creation is communication from

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God about God (Ps. 19). God made rocks, and in making them (we may surmise) intended them to display at least some radiance of his glory. God created human beings in his image, and in so doing designed them to be suitable icons of his character. God oversaw the formation of human families and polities, and as he did so, he directed them so that “fathers” and “kings” depict in various ways how Yahweh relates to his creation, to human beings, and to his people in particular. Ultimately, he designed the world so that fathers and sons would point toward

## Created things are designed to speak to us about God.

the eternal Father who loves his eternal Son. God created everything to communicate of himself and providentially directs creation to the same end.

If that is what created things are, and if God is the Creator who knows and governs his universe, then created things are designed to speak of him. There is no impropriety in calling God Rock, Sun, Father, or in suggesting that there are analogies between father-son relations and the eternal relation of the Father and Son. There would seem to be no obstacle to extending these analogies, provided we recognize when we

leave behind definite statements of scripture and begin to speculate.

Scripture also assumes that God is capable of human speech. Because God has designed creation and humanity and ordinary human language to communicate about him, he can speak clearly in ordinary human language about himself. God has revealed himself in human language, that human language has been preserved in the Bible, and it is ordinary human language. Therefore, ordinary human language is adequate for communicating the reality of God to us.

There is mystery at every point, but why should we expect anything else? We want to talk about, and to, an infinite, incomprehensible God.

The biblical analogies must be handled with care, of course. We must not conclude that because we grasp something of how human beings relate, we know exactly what sort of relation the Father has with the Son. But we should be no more anxious about these analogies than scripture is, and we should certainly not be so anxious about the limits of human knowledge and speech that we are reduced to silence. We worship a God who is Word; he has spoken, and he expects us to speak his words after him. He expects us to learn how to use everything he has revealed and named to honor, praise, and tell of him, because that is the destiny for which everything was created. CC

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# Faith MATTERS

by Carol Zaleski

## Two ascension stories

AS I WRITE this, it is Palm Sunday. Christ has entered Jerusalem on a donkey. A strange king, this, who makes his triumphal procession only to be anointed with death—and a strangely privileged donkey. Augustine says we should all wish to be Christ's donkey, carrying Christ, a weight that exalts and a burden that sets free, into every situation. A rarely sung verse of the "All Glory, Laud and Honor" processional hymn for Palm Sunday echoes this point: *Sis pius ascensor tu, nos quoque simus asellus* . . . ("Be thou, O Lord, the Rider, / And we the little ass: / That to God's holy city / Together we may pass.")

As you read this it is Ascension Thursday, or thereabouts. Christ has entered the heavenly Jerusalem, ascending by means of a divine cloud rather than a humble donkey. The disciples who watch him disappear are understandably awestruck. Two men in white robes—angels, who are always on hand for revelatory events—rebuke them: Why are you standing there staring stupidly at the sky?

The Feast of the Ascension is overshadowed by Easter, which it fulfills, and Pentecost, which it anticipates. But a case could be made that when the disciples caught their last sight, then lost sight, of the living God (a moment touchingly portrayed in Christian art as two departing feet just visible beneath the cloud), both Christianity and its rebel child atheism were born. Doubters and believers alike, we are left staring stupidly at the sky.

In the Wakefield mystery play for the Feast of the Ascension, the apostle Philip calls out to Christ: "Lord, if it be thi will, / shew vs thi fader we the pray; / we have bene with the in good and ill, / and sagh hym neuer nyght ne day." To which Jesus points out that whoever sees him sees the Father—but a moment later Jesus is gone, and Mary keens, "All myghty god, how may this be? / a clowde has borne my childe to blys; / Now bot that I wote [know] wheder is he, / my hart wold breke, well wote I this."

If it is fitting for the disciples and Mary, it is fitting for us to be puzzled by the ascension. As John Henry Newman puts it in an Ascension Day sermon, "This, indeed, is our state at present; we have lost Christ and we have found Him; we see Him not, yet we discern Him." There are no footprints in the sky, but, as Newman says, the ascension of Christ "is a sure token that heaven is a certain fixed place, and not a mere state." By the same token, the ascension means that embodied human nature—Christ's donkey—has a place in heaven. However strange a picture, however stupidly it causes us to stare at the sky, Christ's promise to prepare a place for his members means

nothing less than this: a future life in which, as Dylan Thomas puts it, we "shall have stars at elbow and foot"—and the whole universe (or multiverse, if you prefer) will reveal its secrets, confess its lord, and give us welcome. Hard to believe? The idea was no more probable for ancient science than it is for modern; yet with a robust view of the Creator's authority over creation, it is just barely conceivable.

This year, Ascension Thursday nearly coincides with its Islamic counterpart, *Lailat al-Mi'rāj*—the festival of the night journey (*isrā'*) and heavenly ascension (*mi'rāj*, literally "ladder") of the Prophet Muhammad—which begins at sundown on Friday. On this night, according to tradition, the Prophet was miraculously conveyed from Mecca to Jerusalem (Qur'an 17:1); from there, with the angel Gabriel as his escort, he ascended upon the winged steed Burāq to the seven heavens and the throne of God. My son John has shared with me an account, in the 15th-century Turkish poem *Mevlid-i Şerif* ("Noble Birth"), in which Burāq, though a creature of para-

## Christ's donkey, meet Muhammad's steed.

dise, wastes away with longing to meet the Prophet and bear his weight. Persian and Turkish miniatures show Burāq with a human face, his longing fulfilled, and Muhammad with a face wreathed in holy fire, outshining even Gabriel. At each heaven, Muhammad is greeted by the prophets who preceded him, beginning with Adam and including Jesus, Moses, and Abraham; in the heaven of heavens, he has an audience with God. For believers, the whole journey confirms Muhammad's status as the "seal of the prophets" and the supremely beautiful model for believers to follow; no joy could be greater than to be a beast of burden for such a messenger.

Christ's donkey, meet Muhammad's steed. The two ascension narratives have profoundly different implications; yet in these days when Muslims and Christians alike raise their eyes to heaven, perhaps we can spare a sidelong glance—acknowledging a common wish to bear the weight of loving service, and a common trust in God's promise to prepare a place for those who love him.

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Carol Zaleski is author, with Philip Zaleski, of *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*, coming in June from Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.



# IN Review

## Ask a mortician

by Thomas Lynch

In the promotional material for *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, we are promised “a peek behind the black curtain,” a revelation of “life’s terrifying secret” by a young woman at work burning dead bodies in California—a high priestess, albeit self-appointed, in the “alternative death” community.

Spoiler alert: *we die*. There are no alternatives.

Caitlin Doughty belongs to the selfie generation, so she comes by her fascination with her particulars honestly. To be young and female in a crematory enterprise would be special indeed had it not become the norm some time ago. Once a mostly male endeavor, like the Marine Corps and the Rotary Club, funeral work has been feminized. The exception has become the rule.

Likewise, cremations, which accounted for less than 5 percent of body dispositions in 1970, now outnumber burials across a culture that is less grounded, more mobile and portable, more divisible and scattered than ever before. What once involved a two-day wake, a church service with the dead saint situated at the foot of the altar, and a procession to the graveside or tomb, now involves a cell phone, a credit card, industrially efficient incineration, and a bodiless memorial. The dead, Doughty notices, are rarely dealt with or done for by family anymore. They are instead disposed of by “death care professionals,” leaving survivors free to “celebrate life” away from the noisome mortifications of the corpse and the perils of putrefaction.

Doughty asks:

What was a nice girl like me doing in a body-disposal warehouse like this? No one in her right mind would

choose a day job as a corpse incinerator over, say, bank teller or kindergarten teacher. And it might have been easier to be hired as a bank teller or kindergarten teacher, so suspicious was the death industry of the twenty-three-year-old woman desperate to join its ranks.

Her self-consciousness owes to her tendency to proclaim an expertise she has not yet achieved, as if cremating bodies leads to enlightenment. Some days it does. Some days it is more heat than light. Some days, indeed, the smoke gets in your eyes.

Though not yet expert, she is a very quick study. Her book, if not a must-read, is a really good one; if not an essential text, no less essentially instructive. Doughty has mined a deep vein of reliable witnesses—literary, secular, classic, and collegial—and adds to their best shots at the big questions her own provisional formulations.

In particular, for the reverend clergy, sage, and seminarian, this is a book well worth the trouble, not only for the blood-and-guts intrigues of the crematory and embalming theater, but for the glimpse it offers of the anxious and unchurched who do not occupy the pews—congregants of the growing parish of the religiously and ritually adrift—who, if they ever ask eternal questions, likely do so when there’s a corpse at hand.

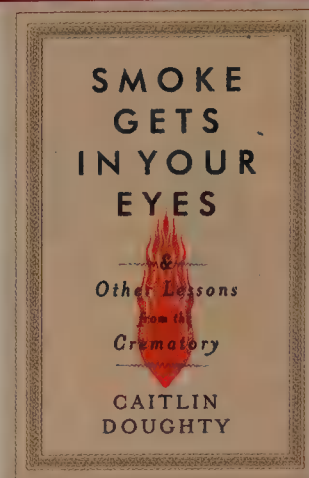
Since witnessing a horrific accident in a shopping mall—a child fell from the second level to her death—Doughty has been obsessed with that vision and its acoustics. “The Thud,” as she calls this formative chapter, can be read as a search for meaning in the senseless

event, for a theodicy in the maw of happenstance, mission and calling in the face of sadness. In this she is not unique. But what is peculiar to her generation is the failure of family or community systems to provide paradigms for responding to death—an infrastructure that can bear the weight of mortality. Tabloid grief and *Death TV* are insufficient. There is no longer a “done thing,” a model for acting out our faith or doubts, grief or gratitude, no humane engagement in the face of mortality.

As the theologian Thomas Long has written, “we have lost our eschatological nerve,” and with it, shared faith in its narrative and comforts. The sinew and vision required for bearing our dead to their dispositions have gone missing with disuse.

Doughty speaks to this dereliction and is willing to try anything to find somewhere to hang her ontological hat. Emboldened by her training in life’s grim realities, she does the heavy lifting, falls into predictably unrequited love, endures an education she does not value, flirts with suicide, opts for life, hooks up with a hitchhiker, and declares enlightenment. Just as many of her parents’ generation believed that they invented sex, Doughty

Thomas Lynch’s most recent books are *Apparition* and *Late Fictions (stories)*, *The Sin-Eater (poems)*, and *The Good Funeral (coauthored with Thomas G. Long)*.



**Smoke Gets in Your Eyes:  
And Other Lessons  
from the Crematory**  
By Caitlin Doughty  
W. W. Norton, 272 pp., \$24.95



can be forgiven for thinking that she, most authentically, has discovered death—real, undeniable, natural death—and that her calling is to revolutionize the way it is done:

For years, working at Westwind and attending mortuary school, I had been afraid to discuss cultural death denial in public. The Internet is not always the kindest of forums, especially for young women. Tucked away in the comment section of my kitschy web series “Ask a Mortician,” there are enough misogynistic comments to last a lifetime. Yes, gentlemen, I’m aware I give your penis rigor mortis. . . . People in the funeral industry weren’t always thrilled that I was sharing what they perceived to be privileged “behind the black curtain” knowledge. . . . To this day the National Funeral Directors Association, the industry’s largest professional association, won’t comment on me.

What’s a girl got to do to get noticed by the industry? Oughtn’t talk of penises be worth something? We can quibble with the low-grade narcissism, but on the larger matters, Doughty gets it right:

In writing *The American Way of Death*, Jessica Mitford wasn’t trying to improve our relationship with death, she was trying to improve our relationship with the price point. That is where she went wrong. It was *death* that the public was being cheated out of by the funeral industry, not money. The realistic interaction with death and the chance to face our own mortality. For all of Mitford’s good intentions, direct cremation has only made the situation worse.

Here Doughty is unpredictably and precisely correct and earns her contrarian stripes. It’s not that morticians charge too much, it’s that they do too much and make it too easy to turn the dead and their dispositions into abstractions.

Of course, most of the mainstream clergy rose to Mitford’s bait and banished the bodies and the boxes from their churches, along with the fierce

urgency of the freshly dead and their grief-stricken kin. What remains, decades later, are bodiless obsequies, ubiquitous and abstract “celebrations of life,” convenient, cost-efficient, easy, and meaningless, which emphasize the good laugh over the good cry, personalities over the promises of faith, and hobbies over the heavy lift. Gone, with the corruptible corpse, are the shoulder and shovel work, the holy witness we owe dead saints and sinners, the heft and heave it takes to go the distance with them. The “sacred community theater,” as Long calls it, has been replaced by a light-duty Kabuki roughly equivalent to Calvary without the crucifixion.

Of course, one upshot of banishing the dead from the foot of our altars and sending them on their way alone is that the living have found a way of going it alone religiously as well, each with a custom-made spirituality du jour. If not cafeteria Christianity, then potluck, personalized, do-it-yourself musings and user-friendly hereafters. That’s a bargain compared to belonging, what with its faith claims and commandments, tithes and stipends, sin and sacrifice.

Doughty intends to correct this cultural estrangement. She has a blog, a book, a career, and a cause; a series on YouTube and a knack for candor. She can be Googled, Tweeted, Facebooked, and Instagrammed. It’s all current and cutting edge, Gawker and Jezebel. Still, for all her new-media savvy, her work is the oldest of human endeavors—to deal with the idea of death by dealing with the dead.

Doughty calls unambiguously for us to take up our part in the care of our fellow pilgrims through every station of dying, death, and disposition, whether we burn or bury them or leave them in trees, place them in tombs or cast them into the sea. It is by getting the dead where they need to go that the living get where they need to be.

We can live with grief’s broken heart and apostasy’s shaken faith, but we cannot live with a rotting corpse. Something has to be done with the dead, Doughty tells us expertly, so we might as well try to do it right.

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**Tailings: A Memoir**  
By Kaethe Schwehn  
Cascade, 136 pp., \$17.00 paperback

**H**olden Village, though firmly rooted in the Gospels and dedicated to values like community, justice, hilarity, and hospitality, is also a place of constant flux." Thus begins this memoir of loss, quest, and initiation, which introduces a place and a spiritual geography.

The fact that Holden Village was once a mining camp in the state of Washington and is now a Lutheran retreat center puts Kaethe Schwehn into rich metaphorical territory. *Tailings* is an apt title: bright orange copper mine tailings are toxic and veritably eternal, perfect symbols for the "terrible beauty" of the post-September 11 world she describes.

The structure of this book follows a deceptively simple linear pattern: ten chapters, one for each month of the 2001–2002 academic year, when the author, in the midst of many transitions, chose to teach at Holden Village. During that year she hoped to recover from the wounds of a failed romantic relationship, occasionally painful memories of her parents' divorce years before, and her uncertainty about the next step in her vocation to become a writer.

Like memoirists Rachel Held Evans, Barbara Kingsolver, and Cheryl Strayed, Schwehn narrows her focus to a short period spent in an exotic, "hearty" space to tell her year-of-living story with ripples of meaning extending beyond her own

life. Within each of the chronological present-tense chapters, time past and time future shimmer and beckon. Contemporary memoirs include at least two layers of time, sometimes referred to as "me then" and "me now." Schwehn, however, is not content with those. She paints with time, applying it with careful detail, much the way the 15th-century painter Jan van Eyck layered on his translucent glazes. She imagines her own family history before she was born:

The bed is king-sized, which means my parents can sleep all night without touching, their worlds distinct and contained: my mother full of sickness and mystery, my father full of the \$1000 he was given and the \$20 he had taken away.

And I am somewhere in the middle, coming into being.

She uses both historical research and imagination to weave her telling of the history of the place, especially drawing on the story of J. H. Holden, the late-19th-century explorer and entrepreneur who founded the original Holden Village around a mining company. She sees him in her mind's eye in 1896: "Thighs wet with dew, hunting grouse beneath a sky marbled with clouds. He is hunting grouse but also ore. He is looking for the glint of sun on feathers but also the harder glint of sun on rock."

Applying another translucent glaze of time, Schwehn allows her mind to drift backward past the industrial age, past the great Greek and Hebrew texts, to what

novelist Willa Cather called the "geologic ages." As she nears the end of her stay in the village, Schwehn compares the sequential rock strata of the Midwest, where she grew up, with the geology of her current place: "In the Cascades it's different, two hundred million year old rocks beside two million year old rocks, the land a reminder of what happens when things collide."

Her deep diving into time and surfacing into the present reality helps readers appreciate what is essentially a coming-of-age story but with its own twists. The author is too sophisticated to reprise the simple redemption story of "I once was blind but now I can see," or "He done me wrong and now I'm free." But she desperately wants redemption.

While resisting an easy reliance on a master narrative, Schwehn undergoes initiation both into her own complex Christian faith and into adulthood. She experiences an Easter epiphany she does not fully trust but that lingers. She manages to think less about "the Intended," her name for the man she was in love with but who rejected her. And she makes progress toward her vocation by imagining herself at the one MFA program that accepted her—the University of Montana's (eventually, according to the book jacket, she earned an MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop). Unlike some members of her generation, she even finds community.

Holden Village is not Eden. Its pile of toxic tailings makes it a Superfund site. Yet the landscape pours out its healing song to a receptive heart: "The snow covers everything that is rough or sharp or scratchy in soft waves. If the sound of the word *ululation* were made into a landscape it would be this." Resisting clichés and expected endings all the way, the author concludes: "Holden didn't let me escape the world; instead, the village helped me make more room for the world inside myself."

Kaethe Schwehn has mined every vein of her younger self, and she has emerged as a writer of great promise.

*Reviewed by Shirley Hershey Showalter, author of Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World. She can be found online at [www.shirleyshowalter.com](http://www.shirleyshowalter.com).*

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## Psalms (New Cambridge Bible Commentary)

By Walter Brueggemann  
and William H. Bellinger Jr.  
Cambridge University Press, 670 pp.,  
\$39.99 paperback

I am often asked by pastors and seminary students, "What is the best commentary available on the Psalms?" I interpret the question to mean, "What commentary will best help me preach and teach from the Psalter?" Even with that more narrow focus, the question is nearly impossible to answer. In the past 20 years nearly every denomination and university press has published at least one commentary on the Psalms, so we have an incredibly rich trove of such resources at our disposal.

Though it may be impossible to identify a single Psalms commentary as the best for Christian exposition, two have long stood above the rest for their balanced, insightful, and theologically rich interpretation: J. Clinton McCann Jr.'s treatment of the Psalms in the *New Interpreter's Bible* and James L. Mays's commentary in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. This new commentary by Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr. deserves a place alongside the work of McCann and Mays.

The excellence of this commentary should come as no surprise. Brueggemann, professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, is one of the most prolific Old Testament scholars of our time. He is the author of more than 100 books, including several important works on the Psalms. Bellinger is professor of Old Testament and chair of the religion department at Baylor University. He is widely recognized as an authority on the Psalter, with four books and numerous articles on the Psalms to his credit.

This commentary is a rare gem. It combines accurate and disciplined scholarship with fresh theological insight in a

*Reviewed by Jerome F. D. Creach, professor of Old Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.*

discussion that is clear and accessible to a broad audience. The format of the commentary includes the NRSV translation of each psalm followed by an expository essay. The essay typically begins with introductory comments about the psalm's genre, purpose, theology, main subject, and literary structure. Then the authors discuss the psalm's contents selectively rather than in a verse-by-verse format. The result displays the authors' signifi-

cant interpretive skills, theological acumen, and creativity.

In addition to the essays are two brief segments labeled "A Closer Look" and "Bridging the Horizons." The former typically includes discussion of an exegetical issue that the authors find interesting and want to highlight. For example, they use "A Closer Look" to explore the expression "Lord of Hosts" in Psalm 84 and to discuss the meaning and back-

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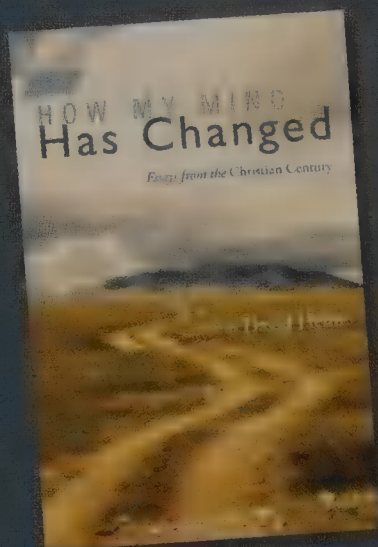


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ground of "to thank" in Psalm 107. "Bridging the Horizons" is mainly devoted to a broader theological issue or to the history of the use of the psalm. These two sections do not appear in the discussion of every psalm, and the treatment of some psalms includes more than one "Bridging" or "Closer Look" segment.

Brueggemann and Bellinger seldom introduce new or innovative interpretations of individual psalms. They are masterful, however, in their presentation of what is most certainly known about the Psalms and in the illustrative style they use to discuss various issues.

For example, in the discussion of Psalm 93 the authors explain Sigmund Mowinckel's well-established theory that the words "the Lord is king" once served as liturgy for a festival in which Israel's God was ceremonially enthroned in the Jerusalem temple. According to this view, the line was perhaps understood to mean something like "the Lord has become king" and was shouted as the Ark of the Covenant was installed in the Holy of Holies. The theory makes sense against the backdrop of a similar Babylonian festival that celebrated Marduk's enthronement. But Israel believed that its God was always king, so why would the Israelites have gathered yearly to proclaim that the Lord had "become king"? Brueggemann and Bellinger suggest that this liturgical cry in the Jerusalem temple is analogous to the church's yearly declaration on Easter that "Christ is risen!"

One of the tests I have developed for judging a commentary on the Psalms is how the author treats Psalm 119. This psalm of 176 verses is so long and so repetitive that many readers find it uselessly redundant. Commentators often agree and thus, rhetorically at least, throw up their hands in resignation, treating the psalm as a thoughtless recapitulation of established convictions. Brueggemann and Bellinger, however, push beyond such simplistic treatment and give fresh insight into the meaning the psalm.

Psalm 119 is didactic and repetitive indeed, they assert, because "the central truth of Torah obedience cannot be said too often." And what is the "central truth"? It is that Torah presents an alter-

native to the "self-destructive autonomy" of modern life; it creates "a counter community to the rat race of commodity." In a "Bridging the Horizons" section, Brueggemann (in one of the few places where one of the authors identifies himself) testifies from his own experience concerning Psalm 119:105, a key verse. He refers to it as "A Cliffs Note for Life" and provides a summary of the psalm's message: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." With such discussion Brueggemann and Bellinger set the reader up to look into the psalm again, not as a boring, unimaginative poem by a prudish priestly author (as it is sometimes characterized), but as a work that mimics the drumbeat of wisdom that is meant to direct the path of the faithful into wholeness and peace.

There are places in which the reader of this commentary must be patient. For example, concerning the prayer for the king's success in battle in Psalm 20, the authors say that "this is a characteristic 'God and Country' utterance" and that "there is no doubt that this psalm lives close to jingoistic patriotism." Such comments might suggest that Brueggemann and Bellinger are presenting a way to read against the psalm. They go on to acknowledge, however, that the psalm has another stanza that seems to represent a second voice or perspective that draws attention away from armaments and urges trust in God. Moreover, they seem to suggest that a careful reading of Psalm 20 leads to an understanding of God as transcendent, as One who will not be used to promote the agenda of a state. They further illustrate the psalm's impact by contrasting H. Richard Niebuhr's insistence on trust in God alone with Reinhold Niebuhr's bent toward partial reliance on the use of military and government resources for good purposes.

If a pastor or church leader selected this commentary by Brueggemann and Bellinger as the one commentary to use for interpreting the Psalms, it would be hard to argue against the choice. When asked for my recommendation of the best commentary on the Psalms for the church, I will now suggest this one as part of a three-way tie.



## Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed? Questions for the Future of Ecumenism

By Michael Kinnamon  
Eerdmans, 175 pp., \$24.00 paperback

Lament over the current “ecumenical winter” and analysis of the factors that have contributed to it have become commonplace in recent ecumenical literature. As he considers the future of ecumenism in *Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed?* Michael Kinnamon gives four reasons for why the ecumenical movement stands in need of renewal: “loss of commitment among church leaders to the goal of Christian unity,” “divisions and other signs of weakness within the ecumenically supportive churches,” “an increasing split between two sets of ecumenical priorities,” and “diminishment of key instruments of the ecumenical movement, including councils of churches.”

Kinnamon is ideally positioned for proposing answers to the questions he raises about ecumenism’s future. A theological educator and veteran ecumenist, Kinnamon retired as general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA in 2011. He had previously served as executive secretary of the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order and as general secretary of the Consultation on Church Union. As a writer he has long been reflecting critically on ecumenical praxis.

Another passionate advocate of ecumenical renewal, George Lindbeck, previously explored conflicting ecumenical visions in the pages of the *CENTURY* (“The Unity We Seek: Setting the Agenda for Ecumenism,” August 9, 2005). As Lindbeck sees it, one faction considers ecumenism’s Life and Work emphasis on cooperation in seeking God’s justice for the world to be coequal with the Faith and Order emphasis on convergence toward visible ecclesial unity; the other faction contends that the Life and Work concern for cooperative justice—though indispensable—must be properly related to the Faith and Order emphasis, which should be seen as pri-

mary but which has been marginalized in the ecumenical movement. Both paradigms agree that the unity of the church is an end in itself and that the theological basis of such unity is God’s action in Christ for the world’s salvation.

Kinnamon, whom Lindbeck points to as a proponent of the view that Life and Work is coequal with Faith and Order, construes the split differently. As Kinnamon sees it, some ecumenists prioritize justice and see visible unity as an impediment to achieving it, and some fear that the ecumenical pursuit of justice has politicized the ecumenical movement to the point that progress on Faith and Order is much more difficult. But both parties weaken the ecumenical movement if they shun the integration of the impulses for justice and unity that Kinnamon commends. As he notes in a chapter on environmental protection as a proper locus of ecumenical cooperation, not everyone can be fully involved in all expressions of the multifaceted ecumenical movement, but all expressions of the quest for Christian unity should be viewed by everyone as inseparable.

In my judgment, Kinnamon’s call for the integration of unity and justice makes them not coequal ends so much as coherent expressions of the singular end of the church’s unity. Or, to put it differently by drawing on James William McClendon Jr., the just shalom of the reign of God is one “end-picture” of the church’s unity, as is the ultimate eucharistic unity of the eschatological banquet. The transformation of the world through the good news of God’s action in Jesus Christ is yet another end-picture that resonates with some outsiders to conciliar ecumenism; these thinkers point to the roots of the modern ecumenical movement in the modern missions movement and contend that a recovery of concern for unity in mission is vital to the contemporary renewal of ecumenism.

*Reviewed by Steven R. Harmon, who teaches Christian theology at Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. He is the author of Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity (Cascade).*



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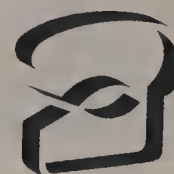
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# NOTES FROM THE GLOBAL CHURCH

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Philip Jenkins writes *Notes from the Global Church* for the *Christian Century*.

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Kinnamon frequently refers to his identification with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It may be that Kinnamon's formation within the broader free church tradition supplies him with resources for conceiving of the ecumenical movement as a renewal movement that stands in need of renewing. One of the ecclesial gifts that the free churches offer to the rest of the body of Christ is an emphasis on the gathered local congregation as the essential way in which church happens.

Kinnamon commends local ecumenical covenants in which neighboring churches seek to make unity visible at the grassroots level through mutual pledges "to express together a shared Christian life to the extent current circumstances permit," including a commitment to ensuring that new ministers in covenanting churches uphold the covenant and prioritize ecumenical relationships in other ways. The widespread adoption of this practice would do much to address the ever-present problem of ecumenical reception: receiving and embodying locally what has been deemed theoretically feasible at national and international levels of ecumenical dialogue.

Another ecclesial gift of the free churches is their "pilgrim church" ecclesiological vision. They are on a pilgrimage toward a church that is fully under the rule of Christ, and they locate this church not in any past or present ecclesial instantiation but in an end-picture of a church fully under Christ's rule. Thus the free churches are deeply suspicious of realized eschatologies involving the church. This pilgrim church vision is also articulated in Catholic magisterial teaching, and it is embraced by many Christian communities beyond the free church tradition.

The ecumenical movement too has a pilgrim church vision as a renewal movement within the church, for it seeks a church that embodies Jesus' prayer for its visible unity and thus is fully under the rule of Christ. The recovery of this pilgrim orientation is integral to the ecumenical movement's renewal. Kinnamon's lively collection of essays is a compelling contribution toward that end.

## Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Celebrating the Joys of Letter Writing

By Nina Sankovitch  
Simon & Schuster, 224 pp.,  
\$16.00 paperback

A member of my congregation is dying at home in the care of a hospice team and his wife, who keeps medications straight and speaks with the pharmacist, doctor, nurses, and aides. She prepares meals and tends to her husband's personal comfort and other needs. The couple's daughter reported that one day her father said to her mother, "Would you sit here for a minute and hold my hand?" The daughter continued, "My mother is so busy doing things for

*Reviewed by Jeffrey Johnson, pastor at  
Peace Lutheran Church in Wayland,  
Massachusetts.*

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my dad she forgets to take time to be with him."

While there is no substitute for the touch of a loved one's hand, when that hand is not nearby, a personal letter is the next best thing. Sankovitch writes, "There can be no greater kindness, no greater offering of compassion, than the lessening of sorrow and the bringing of comfort through a letter."

When Sankovitch's son left home for college, she wished for letters from him: "A letter, if I am lucky, offers the very smell of my child, his scent on the page, soap or sweat. . . . A letter brings him home again." From this personal starting point Sankovitch explores the meaning and value of letters in our post-postal age. E-mail, texting, and Twitter are main-

stream modes of personal and group communication, certainly for current college students. Letters—considered, composed, and posted—seem like quaint artifacts, the custom and property of older generations.

But letters still capture our attention. We find them stuffed into file drawers and stacked in storage boxes in the basement and in archives at the library. Occasionally we become quiet long enough to write a letter ourselves.

Sankovitch samples letters from young adults, from soldiers, from lovers, from parents, from the dying, from the bereaved, and from those who hope to comfort the bereaved. There are letters from intimate friends and letters from leaders who reach out with authority to people whom they have never seen in person.

In 1964 Thomas Merton wrote a letter to Chris McNair, father of 11-year-old Denise McNair, who was killed by a bomb planted in a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. Merton acknowledged that he was a stranger to McNair, but he wanted to tell him through a letter that his daughter remained "a witness to innocence and to love, and inspiration to all of us who remain to face . . . the heart-break of the struggle for human rights and dignity."

Sankovitch also shows us letters from writers of fiction and poetry. Emily Dickinson wrote a letter in response to a request for a photograph of herself. She had no picture to send, so she put this in her letter: "I am small, like the wren; and my hair is bold, like the chestnut bur; and my eyes, like the sherry in the glass, that the guest leaves. Would this do just as well?" Another time Dickinson wrote that "a letter is a joy of earth."

Over the deathbed and over the ages, hands and letters bring some of the same messages. Some decades ago, *Atlantic Monthly* editor Edward Weeks stated something about letters that applies to those of us who still sit together to hear words of depth and importance in ancient letters read publicly: "Letters reflect the spirit, affection and passion of men and women reaching across the silence of space for the sympathy of another heart."

## BookMarks

### Lucy Stone: An Unapologetic Life

By Sally G. McMillen

Oxford University Press, 360 pp., \$29.95

Among those credited with propelling the women's movement forward in the 19th century, one name is often left off the list. Lucy Stone was a passionate and fearless orator, an abolitionist, and a proponent of women's civil and property rights. But as McMillen shows, Stone was deliberately excluded by other women suffragettes for her support of the Fifteenth Amendment which gave black men the right to vote. That exclusion had a lasting impact on her legacy. McMillen details Stone's willingness to speak when others were silent, even in the face of ridicule and rejection, and her difficult relationships with other women who shared her goals. It is a portrait of persistence, but also of the bitter divides over race that stymied the path to equal rights for all in the 19th century.

### Saying No to Say Yes: Everyday Boundaries and Pastoral Excellence

By David C. Olsen and Nancy G. Devor

Rowman & Littlefield, 142 pp., \$20.00 paperback

Clergy sexual misconduct gets the most attention when boundary violations are discussed. Olsen and Devor believe that focus gets in the way of addressing the need for other kinds of boundaries that help ministry to flourish. They argue that boundary problems mostly arise when there is confluence between unresolved personal issues on the part of a pastor and high stress in the congregational system itself. Boundary maintenance is needed not only so that pastors don't burn out, but so that congregations can thrive. Pastors may set boundaries that are too rigid, which tends to drive people away. Olsen and Devor recommend the formation of clergy groups in which people hold each other accountable to boundary awareness and maintenance.

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# ON Media

## Kids these days

In the film *While We're Young*, Noah Baumbach probes the conflict between the Gen X and millennial generations while exploring the zeitgeist of the digital age.

The plot is a love story between two couples. Gen-Xers Josh (Ben Stiller) and Cornelia (Naomi Watts), in their forties, meet winsome millennials Jamie (Adam Driver) and Darby (Amanda Seyfried), who, like a lot of New Yorkers in their creative circle, are just starting to have babies. After struggling with infertility, Josh and Cornelia have accepted a child-free life. As their friends peel off into baby music classes and nighttime feeding schedules, Josh and Cornelia are left behind.

When they meet Jamie and Darby, they quickly fall in love, but not in the way we might expect. There's some mild flirtation, but no partner swapping or sexual tension. Instead, Josh and Cornelia, who feel trapped by their pursuit of success, are enamored of everything the younger couple does. While Josh and Cornelia have spent decades cultivating success and "good taste," Darby and Jamie are all about "process." They mix pop culture with high art and embrace hip-hop, old cartoons, Mozart, and slashers in an alluring pastiche. For the younger couple, experience matters more than content or results.

The generational gap between 25 and 42 might not seem that great. But Baumbach, 45, has explored the subtle differences in many of his films. His characters express disdain and frustration with younger hipsters in *Greenberg*; in *Frances Ha*, the characters relate tenderly to hipsters' earnest confusion. He has an expert eye for the small differences that signal profound changes.

Take marriage. When Josh and Cornelia tell their older friends that Jamie

and Darby are only in their twenties but already married, the friends' response is a predictable "why?" For Gen-Xers, marriage is something you do only after great deliberation. You worry that you're reinforcing patriarchal or capitalist values that you meant to reject. For Jamie and Darby, marriage is like an old-fashioned typewriter: it's an object with an intrinsic value whose purpose they are discovering or reinventing for themselves.

The film focuses on the characters' differences in other values and virtues. Josh and Cornelia worry, for example, that they lack generosity in their preoccupation with success and critical evaluation, while Darby and Jamie seem to exude generosity. These differing mentalities come to a head in the profession that Josh and Jamie both pursue: documentary filmmaking. Josh begins to have second thoughts about what generosity is when he observes Jamie's documentary work and sees that Jamie is comfortable with stretching the truth and appropriating the experiences of others to create his version of reality. This isn't generosity, as Josh understands it. "That's not sharing," he says. "That's stealing."

Baumbach is too subtle to offer simple moral lessons. Instead he pushes us to see that there's more going on here. Josh doesn't know how to relate to Jamie's project because it's not documentary work as he knows it. Josh worries that making documentaries has become impossible in the digital age. When everyone is already filming everything all the time, what is a documentary? But he also knows that something new is emerging in Jamie's work, something too new to name.

The digital age has changed how we imagine our relationship to the world. Josh and Cornelia are more addicted to



PHOTO BY JON PACK. © 2014 SCOTT RUDIN PRODUCTIONS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

**GENERATIONS:** Josh (Ben Stiller) and Cornelia (Naomi Watts) have their lives turned upside down when they meet a disarming young couple.

their smartphones than their younger friends are, but they think of Google and Facebook as "tools" in a life governed by older rules and ethics. Jamie and Darby, meanwhile, barely use Facebook and resist Googling at every encounter; they readily choose ignorance over instant gratification. But they think that the world is created in the free exchange of ideas, information, images, and relationships, and they're comfortable appropriating and rearranging whatever they find to create meaning. For Jamie and Darby, the Internet is far more than a tool; it has transformed their understanding of reality.

*While We're Young* suggests that none of us will be able to go back to a world where every idea is properly linked to its author, every song properly contained in an album. Generosity is no longer the act of giving from carefully guarded bounty. The digital age is recalibrating our notion of what it means to *have* something, to use it, to own it, and to share it.

If the digital natives don't yet understand the meaning and the ethical import of all of this, suggests Josh, it's not because they're evil. They're just young.

The author is Kathryn Reklis, who teaches theology at Fordham University.



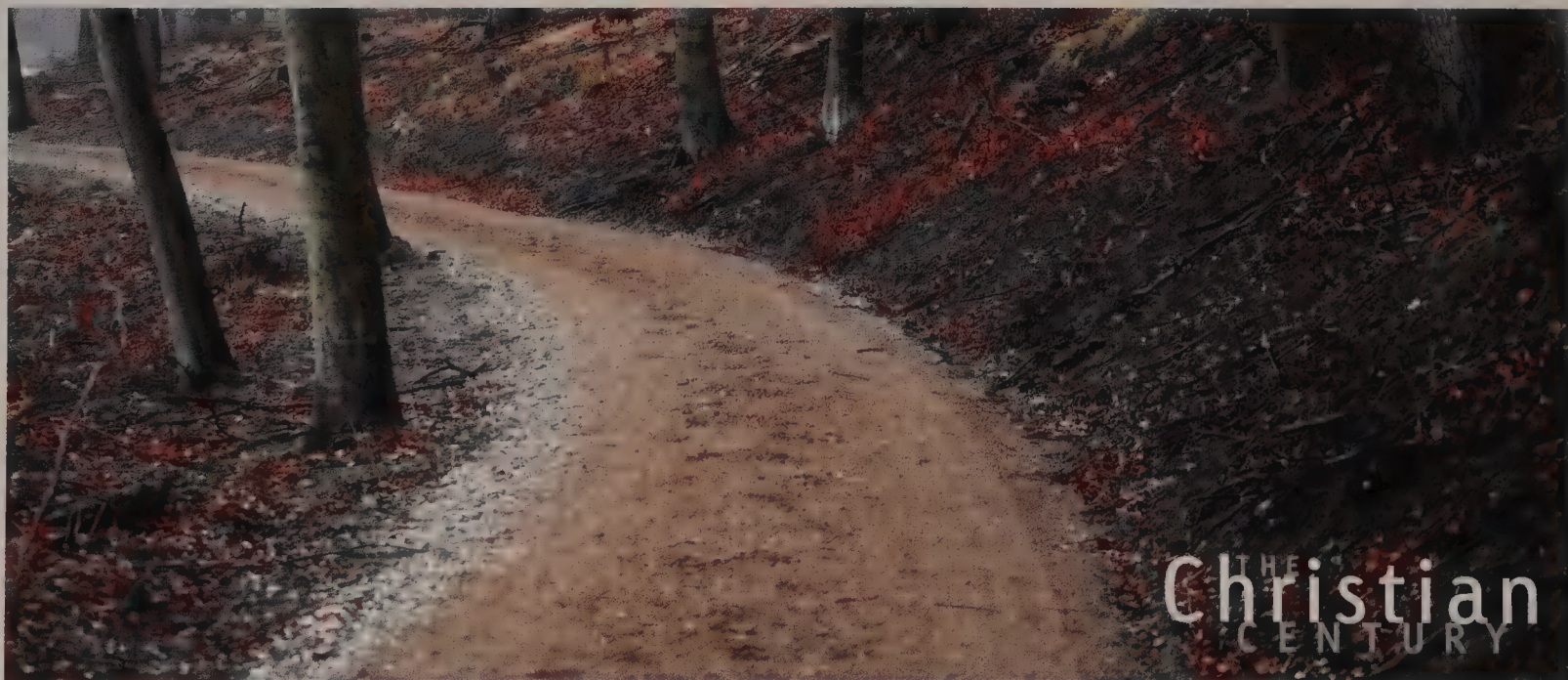


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**Faith Matters**



“‘Energy,’ William Blake said, ‘is eternal delight.’ But Blake **was** wrong; energy is a youthful, and therefore transient and corruptible, delight. Eternal delight reveals itself not when **we** possess energy in natural abundance, but when **our** energy is depleted and then mysteriously renewed by a **source** outside ourselves.”

*(from “Renewable energy,” Faith Matters)*





by Philip Jenkins

Earlier this year, the thugs of the Islamic State murdered a Japanese hostage named Kenji Goto, a thoughtful and even saintly Christian journalist. Goto had for years campaigned for humanitarian causes worldwide, and he found himself in Syria in a vain attempt to rescue another Japanese hostage.

Although we rarely think of Japan as a promising land for Christianity, such a case reminds us that believers do exist there. Goto himself was a convert to the United Church of Christ. Between 2008 and 2010, Japan had two Christian prime ministers in close succession, one Catholic and one Baptist, and astonishingly, these were the seventh and eighth Christians to hold that office over the past century.

Nevertheless, the number of Japanese Christians is tiny—barely 1 percent of the population, far fewer than in neighboring Asian lands. That fact teaches some comparative lessons about the religion's appeal outside the West.

Christianity has a deep history in Japan, and that story is essential to understanding present realities. In the century after 1560, a European Catholic mission won stunning successes in the country before being rooted out in a savage persecution. The faith was banned for centuries, although some hidden believers survived in remote regions. Only in the late 19th century was it once more legal to practice Christianity,

and believers were long regarded as suspect because of their foreign creed.

We might think that past persecutions explain the extreme weakness of Christianity in modern-day Japan. But the faith also suffered extreme and persistent violence in other countries where it eventually flourished. Korea is a case in point. Japanese Christians have faced no legal disabilities since the collapse of the militarist regime in 1945, and two generations should be ample time to rebuild from persecution. So why has Japan not followed the example of Christian growth in South Korea or China, or several other countries in the region?

In Korea and China, Christians won their greatest successes during eras of dictatorship or military rule, when there was massive disenchantment with mainstream politics and approved social values. Christianity represented an authentic counter-culture, a refuge from oppression, and a voice for human rights. That gave the churches a firm foundation on which to build when restraints were lifted and repression eased.

For all the flaws of the Japanese political parties, the country has been faithfully democratic since 1945 and has never generated the same kind of mass disaffection. A thirst for alternative values

might draw some intellectuals or elite cultural figures to Christianity, but not in the way it has elsewhere.

In other Pacific Rim nations, moreover, Christianity carries an aura of progress and modernity, which is a major reason why the Chinese communists (for instance) have largely favored its growth since the 1980s. Japan, in contrast, is long past the era when it looked to the West for advice about modernization in any form. Rather, fashionable Westerners look to that country for cultural and technological trends.

That takes us back to the heroic but ultimately doomed saga of the early Catholic missions, a familiar theme in Japanese history and literature. In contrast to all other Asian nations, Japan's Christianity is powerfully associated not with the progressive future but with the sufferings of a tragic past, and even with a romantic idea of noble failure.

The best-known Japanese example of this approach is Shusaku Endo, the Catholic novelist who is commonly ranked among the finest Christian writers of the 20th century. His great work, *Silence*, depicts a tormented priest during the persecutions of the 17th century, who wanders a desolate landscape of

martyrdom and massacre, the church visibly perishing before his eyes. The plot turns on whether, or rather when, he will himself betray his faith. It is a magnificent work, an undoubted Christian classic, but it takes a subtle and educated reader to find in it a ringing advertisement for the faith. Anything less like Prosperity Gospel teachings would be hard to imagine.

Although Endo was perhaps an extreme case, his writing suggests the profound appeal of Christianity in Japan, but also its strictly elitist nature. Elsewhere in Asia, millions flock to charismatic megachurches—which are unknown in Japan, where Catholicism of a distinctly traditional kind still reigns. By far the country's best-known Christian institution is the very prestigious Sophia University, founded by Jesuits in 1913, which has produced many scholars and political leaders. (Endo was an instructor there.)

In the foreseeable future, Japanese Christianity will not achieve the kind of spectacular growth that has occurred in other parts of Asia. But the faith that does exist exercises a cultural and political influence far beyond what the seemingly paltry numbers might suggest.

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*Philip Jenkins's forthcoming book is The Many Faces of Christ: The Thousand-Year Story of the Survival and Influence of the Lost Gospels.*



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COURTESY OF GORDON GALLERY (NASHVILLE)

*Birdman, by Joe Light*

Joe Light was a towering, often disturbing figure in his Memphis community. He aligned himself with the prophets and considered himself a kind of Moses. Before he became an artist, he was incarcerated. In prison in 1960, he heard a preacher explore the Old Testament, and he returned to his cell with the sound of a voice in his head. Commenting on the experience later, he said that he thought he was losing his mind. He tested the voice: “If you are God, prove it.” “Step up to the cell door,” the voice answered, “and I’m going to let a bird land on that window sill . . . Tell it what to do, and it will do it.” And sure enough the bird landed on it . . . That bird on that man’s head is like the spirit of God. I felt the presence of God following me regularly.” While various versions of the birdman exist, this image remains Light’s signature piece. Light was a bit of a loose cannon, said Kevin Gordon, owner of Gordon Gallery in Nashville, “but he was also a man whose personal beliefs were strong, and who wasn’t the least bit afraid to share them with anyone, no matter the consequences.”

*Art selection and comment by Lil Copan, a painter and editor.*



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